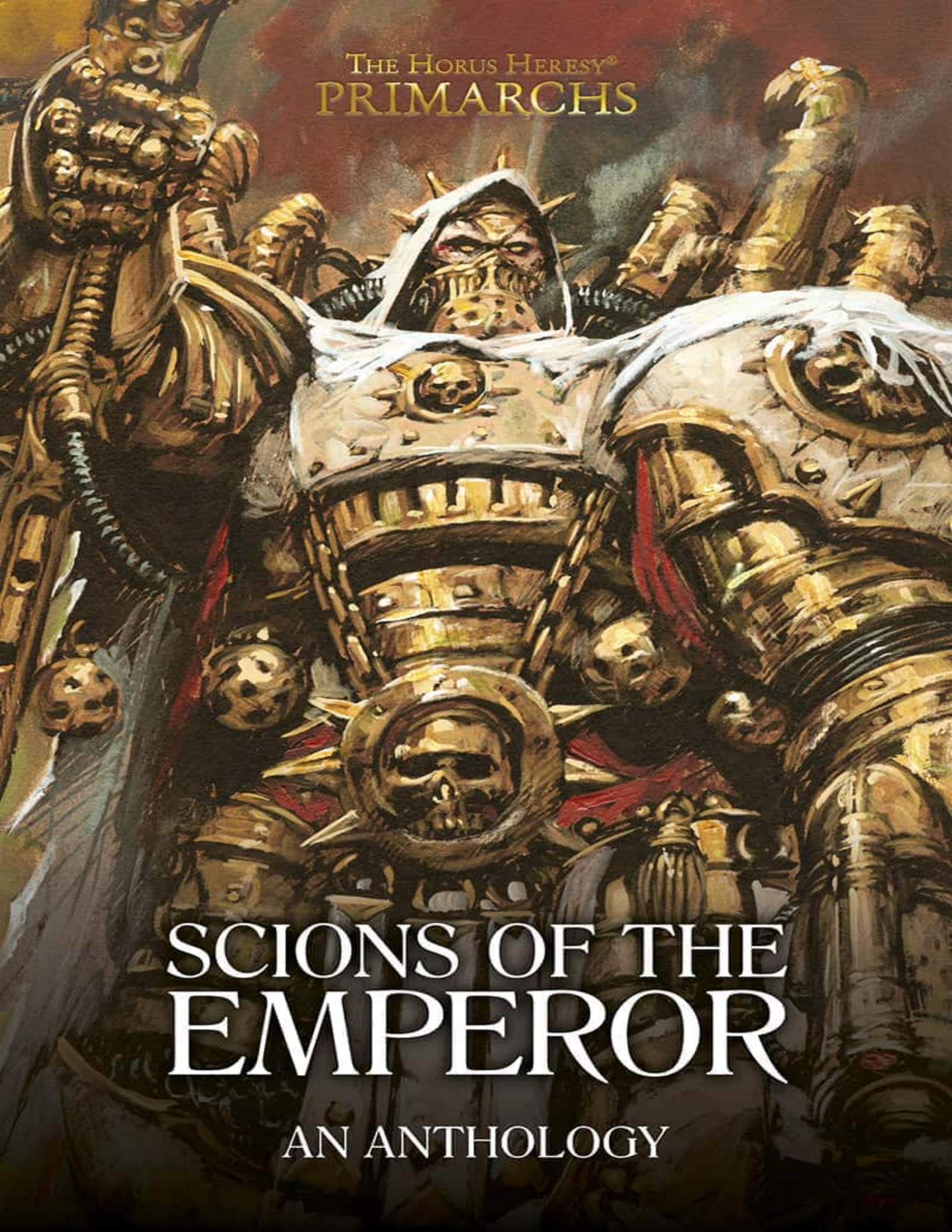
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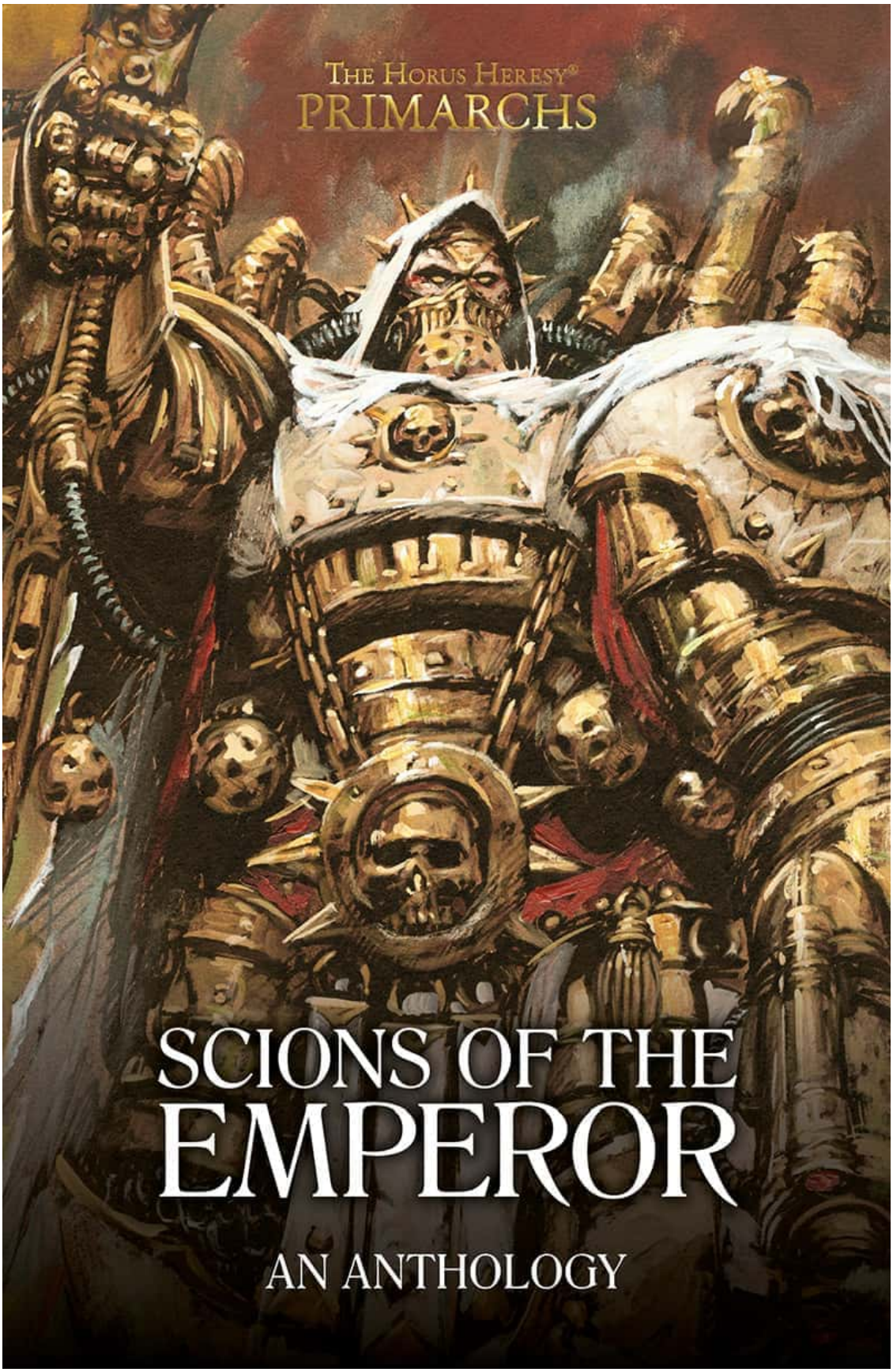
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SCIONS OF THE EMPEROR

AN ANTHOLOGY

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The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away…

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CANTICLE

David Guymer

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The boy had no name.

The capsule that had first brought him to this world had labelled him *X*, but he had earned a great many names since that day of his awakening. The storm giants of the Karaashi Pinnacle, elementals of dark rock fused into cognitive sheaths of mineral armour, artificer-sages and warrior-mystics, had called him *Cataclysm*. It had been his planetfall that had sundered their mountain monastery, and his explorations that had unwittingly released the great wyrm from its captivity there. The boy had not been able to stop it. He had not been strong enough. From that day, the boy had called himself *Hunter*. Following its path of destruction brought him to the black ice of the surface world. The undying phantasmagoria that haunted the foothills of Karaashi – shades of code-personality mis-phased from time and dimension, and from sanity itself – had called him *The Finality*. Further south, where black ice gave way to gritty tundra, the pyramid complexes of aeons-lost civilisations broke through the layers of dust, their perfect geometries unscarred by the howling storms, their seals unbroken until the coming of the boy. The mecharachnids and phasewraiths that guarded the labyrinths of those tombs had not sought to name him, only to kill him. But the eidolic algorithms that had, as a last resort, sought to communicate had called him *Rehew Netjer*. It had meant Son of Man.

The fragment warlords of the Subliminat had called him *Flesh*.

The name had, at first, been extemporised as an expression of desire, for a

resource too priceless to leave unnamed. Then with contempt, as their efforts to assimilate the boy into their worker collectives proved fruitless. Then with fear-code, as the boy dismantled their harvester cohorts one by one and came for them.

Of all the names he had worn or been given, it was the one that had resonated with him the most.

He was flesh.

But it had not stuck. What need did he have for a name?

He had walked from the wreckage of the Black Pinnacle and the ruins of the once-mighty civilisation therein for a time he could not track and a distance he could not measure, ever south, following the trail of the biomechanical beast he had set loose.

If there was a sun around which this black world turned then it was alien to the boy. If there was a season then it was winter. Its changelessness was a black cloak over a landscape where each blast of wind was an apocalypse. There was no day. There was no night. Light emerged spontaneously. Frenetic windspeeds and an abundance of electro-dense particulates in the air generated frequent, albeit erratic, electromagnetic bursts. The boy had been taught none of this, but he knew it, intuited it, pursued such understanding with the same voracious appetite with which he submitted his changing physiology to each new trial of its limits.

And if it had any then the boy had not reached them yet.

He had gauged the erosion of time by the new challenges that he faced, and by the steady lengthening of his limbs as he walked, the thickening of muscle, the slow change of his body from that of a boy into *something else* that he could not yet define.

For not once in all that time had he encountered a being that came anywhere close to resembling himself.

The boy reached out towards the dead thing.

It was marginally smaller than he was, encased in a bronzed ceramic shell that had, before grit and dust and age had scoured the curved plates to senility, borne some kind of pictorial script. It had two arms, two legs, a single head. Though similar to many of the robotic, semi-robotic and *infernal* creatures that he had encountered, vertical symmetry was an uncommon template in the boy’s experience. There was something

intuitively familiar about this body’s design however, something that appealed to his sense of logic.

He brushed dust from the corpse’s face. The wind broke against the back of his hand, black sand quickly piling up past the line of his middle finger, briefly shielding a visor screen. A network of shatter lines tunnelled through the tempered glass, opaque rings where windblown particulates had impacted but without force enough to break the material entirely. Some of the damage looked significantly older than others, the stress halos wider. The boy did not think the body had lain here long enough to account for the damage. Raw material, flesh or otherwise, did not stay unpicked for long. What the wind did not bury or destroy, every techscavenger with even a partial auspex in range would soon be flocking towards.

He looked through the cracked visor.

Inside, a face.

It was hard and pale, a face painted on bone, its own internal symmetry framed by a mess of long, ash-black hair. The forehead lay against the inside of the helmet, as if glancing away, hair covering the mottling bruises. The eyes were wide and dark. The lips were blue. The boy stared, fascinated. He had always understood that he did not belong to this world. He knew, in his bones, that he had a purpose that went beyond the bruising challenges of his immediate environment. He did not know what it was, only that it was out there, somewhere, and that he needed to be strong enough to face it. This frail corpse was not it, but it felt like another step on the path he would take towards finding it.

He looked up.

The mountains of the northlands lay behind him. Ahead, a lowland of fierce winds and biting, almost predatory squalls of dust. A trail of metal fragments littered the desert. The wind animated them. Twists of metal walked end-over-end, misshapen legionaries of dark iron that for all their apparent vigour went nowhere, the wind pushing them two steps backwards for every two steps forwards, burying them piecemeal under black sand.

Soon, they would all be gone.

Then they too would be sand.

Beyond their trooping ranks, a great trapezoidal hulk of weather-beaten steel lay on its side. The scaffolding of its undercarriage lay exposed. Like an armoured creature tipped onto its flank to bare the soft parts beneath.

Solid rubber tyres taller than the boy, with treads as thick as the length of his hand, jutted into the wind. Bits of track lay strewn amongst the wind-tossed debris, along with other, larger, fragments of sponson, hull armour, and coils of sense array. The boy mentally reassembled the super-heavy vehicle. It was long, low-slung over a bed of enormous tyres and nail-studded tracks, with a low centre of gravity that nothing short of a once-in-a-millennium storm would put onto its side. To the boy's intuitive understanding it was obvious that the monster had been attacked. The warping of the armour shell was consistent with that of a plasma blast. The body he had discovered had probably been crewing one of the sense nests before being thrown clear by the explosion. They would have been killed in the blast or expired shortly after when their exo-armour's umbilicals had been torn, severing them from their vehicle's environment.

The boy withdrew his hand.

The dust buried the face anew.

He looked again over the wreckage, largely succeeding in ignoring the growls of complaint from his belly.

He subsisted on a diet of sand, supplemented by whatever minerals and metals he could scavenge. His physiology was able to metabolise whatever inorganic material he could ingest, but even scraping the organic tissues from the cyborgnetic ghouls and skin-wearing demimachinic reavers he could run down and kill did little to soften the pangs. The last time he had been truly sated was when he had slain the last fragment lord of the Subliminat. He had broken into their amnioesis vats, feasted on amino acid slurries and lipid pastes until he had been too full to move so much as an eyelid, but even that banquet had not satisfied his metabolism for long. In a way, the boy almost liked the feeling of hunger. It was like a spirit familiar, keeping him focused, keeping him sharp.

If not for its growls, he might have ignored the vehicle wreck and carried on south.

He considered breaking open the corpse's exo-armour and devouring the meat inside, but he did not. The boy was not entirely sure why, except for that haunting familiarity of face and form. He hoped he would not regret it. He knew he could not guarantee that the body would still be there when he returned.

With a creak of metal, he rose.

Even by the definitions of later years his armour would be considered a masterpiece, limited only by the materials available to him and the tools he could obtain to work them, but not by the visionary genius that underpinned the whole. Adamantium plates were bolted together with bronze rings, ribbons of kineto-mimetic crystal chemically welded to sheets of ultra-hard glasteel. The tapestry of colours and materials unavoidably left parts of his body bare. His left forearm, both legs, his hands, his head. His eyes shone like silver coins. His hair was rugged and black.

The wind broke against him with storm force and the boy set his jaw, enjoying the sensation of its pushing, clawing, his muscles bunching and resisting.

Winning.

He drove the haft of his weapon into the sand.

It was best described as a bardiche. The long pole had originated within the spinal cabling of the seer-king of the storm giants. The curved blade had been the claw of a phasewraith. It seemed to have retained some of its transdimensional properties even after the boy had torn it from the ghost machine and it had blended itself to the weapon shaft as if moulding itself to the boy's vision. He had discovered any number of ranged firearms in the desert, powerful solid projectile weapons, devices that harnessed exotic forms of matter and every type of energy his innate genius could conceive, and had assembled several of his own design from found parts. He had built conversion blasters powered by electromagnetism and autocannons to fire bullets of compacted sand. But however much ingenuity he bent to the task he had not been able to craft a weapon that could kill as reliably or well as a blade wielded with his own two hands.

The boy crunched over the first rank of wind-tossed debris as he walked, the tear in the super-heavy crawler's side gaping dark and savage, and curiously enticing.

No corpse stayed unpicked for long.

He found a scavenger chewing on the circuitry exposed by the evisceration of the sense nest. The creature was hunched over the torn-out panelling with the intense focus of an invertebrate predator. Metallic encrustations and strings of cabling blotched the cadaverous black flesh of its back. As the boy's bare foot creaked onto the crumpled metal bulkhead that had since

become the floor, the creature’s gaze shot up from its meal. Half-chewed wires spilled from its mouth. Its eyes had been refashioned with dull sense augmetics, lasers crisscrossing the violated cupola and splashing across the boy like weak acid. It moaned. A low-wattage kinetic field flickered as it rose, capable of casting off the low-mass, high-velocity impacts that would shred the flesh parts from a cyborg zombie’s metallic skeleton in moments.

It was next to useless against a blade.

The boy impaled the zombie on his bardiche before it could rise off its haunches, cracking open torso armour before driving through at an angle and pinning it to the corner of the bulkhead it had been feasting on.

The weird energies bound up in the material of the blade dumped their charge into the electrics, forcing a blizzard of sparks from the wall. The cyborg zombie jerked and blackened before the boy’s eyes, a hundred small wires stuffed down its throat and force-feeding it electrical power, but despite everything, it failed to die. It continued to chew on the wiring that was cooking it from the inside, grasping for the boy with both hands.

The boy was not sure whether it was the construct’s hungry moans or the spark cascade that signalled the others.

Narrow corridors went left and right from the cupola, deeper into the immobilised hulk. A drop hatch revealed an iron-runged ladder that the vehicle’s current list had turned from a straight vertical climb into a horizontal crawlspace.

Bestial groans and metallic squeals issued from all three.

The boy spun as a cyborg zombie raced from the corridor to his right. Its body was sheathed in bladed edges, eyes glowing, its metallic exoskeleton tearing sparks from the conduits as it ran. These creatures were slow to get moving, but once they identified a target they were almost as swift in the hunt as the boy. Their lower limbs had been replaced by spring blades and pistons, their bodies studded with electro-stimm grafts and crawling with waste energy.

Leaving the bardiche to pin the first zombie to the bulkhead, the boy caught the second cyborg’s grasping claws in his palm. He twisted the cyborg’s wrist behind its back, then drove his right hand into the side of the zombie’s face and smashed it against the wall. Brain paste leaked through his fingers. Electricity spasmed across the wrecked cranium, shocking the boy’s fingers, as the now headless zombie tore into his girdle plating with

its talons.

The boy scowled as a third freed itself from the net of cabling hanging across the corridor behind him with a moan of hunger.

He had expected destroying the organic brain to kill them.

Throwing the headless cyborg from him, the boy turned to deliver a kick that slammed the newcomer into the bulkhead.

A fourth pulled itself from the drop hatch.

With, at best, a second before he found himself surrounded, the boy grabbed it by the provoker rods that dotted its scalp and dragged it out of the crawlspace. Clamping the zombie between his fist and the frame of the hatch like a metal sheet for beating, the boy dropped a punch onto its spine. Something cracked. One arm fell limp as motor control died.

The boy performed a mental calculation. He put the motive cortex somewhere between the twelfth and seventeenth vertebrae. Taking a guess, he smashed his fist down a second time.

The creature's back bent a V towards the bulkhead and the lights behind its sense augmetics blinked out.

The other two recovered their footing at about the same time. The headless zombie swayed, thrashing wildly at the air with its talons. The other moaned and ran into the boy's arms. The stink of electrically stimulated carrion flesh filled the boy's mouth as he struggled to push the unliving cyborg off. Its talons ripped at his armour. Mechanical buzz-jaws ground for his face. With a roar, the boy drove the zombie into the bulkhead. Blunt trauma squelched the cyborg's soft tissues. It did not react. It bit down on the boy's shoulder. The buzz of its teeth became a shriek as the zombie gorged on the mineralogic content of his armour. Next to the riches offered by the downed hulk's electricals it must have been a meagre feast, but the boy supposed that the zombies' scavenger protocols worked to a hierarchy that directed them to devour immediate threats first.

The headless cyborg stumbled in behind him, butting the back of his head with the wet stump of its neck. It was still trying to eat him. The boy realised that he probably had a matter of moments before its core programming reassessed the situation and redirected it to ripping him apart with its talons.

With the first zombie content to feast on his shoulder plates, the boy reached behind him to rip out whatever wire and circuity he could tear loose

from the headless cyborg’s neck cavity. Bits of gristle and rubberised tubing came away in his grasping fingers before he had dug away enough meat to uncover the bevelled head of a copper spindle. The boy pulled hard. It parted. A large chunk of augmetised respiratory system came away with it and the thing finally died, asphyxiated, a rubber lung and a spidery jumble of associated machinery jammed in its neck.

His shoulder plate was almost gone.

The pain was horrific.

With a roar, the boy shoved the last zombie off and punched.

His fist broke through teeth, through brain, through the back of its skull, and proceeded to do superficial damage to the bulkhead behind it. Switching algorithms, the cyborg attempted to grab him with its talons, only to find itself securely pinned by the boy’s arm in its face. Claws raked the boy’s already tattered armour as he planted his heel in the zombie’s midriff and, with a growl of effort, tore the cyborg’s torso from its legs. He dug inside the creature’s rotten abdomen for the motive cortex and crushed it.

Walking unsteadily, the boy planted his foot on the shoulder of the zombie he had left skewered in its half-crouch against the bulkhead and pulled out his bardiche.

Then, breathing hard, pinning it to the floor underfoot, he smashed the animate construct to pieces using the butt end.

The boy quickly decided that there was no way his body was going to fit through the drop hatch, so he entered the crawler via the corridor. With a fifty-fifty decision to make, he went right. The stale odours of a contained environment had sunk deep into the metal, and in spite of the gale that howled through the cupola mere metres behind him, the corridor still reeked of oil and urine and sweat. The fit was tight, even for a boy, and he crawled on his belly along what was supposed to have been a wall for about five metres before his nose wrinkled from a fresher and fouler stink.

He dropped out of the ‘wall’ and into a cylindrical chamber of scuffed metal, fluff-choked ventilator stacks and crumpled radiation grilles. An array of consoles folded into the ceiling, now the left-hand wall, but the attack and subsequent cannibalisation of the vehicle had caused them to drop down, gut-like spools of heavy cabling looping towards the ground. The consoles and wiring had been well chewed. The half-eaten pieces of

one of the crew lay scattered over the equipment trays. The source of the smell. There was not much of a face left to speak of, but enough to suggest a familial resemblance to the body that the boy had found outside. A man, like him. There was no sign of exo-armour. The boy supposed that there had been no need for such protection before the hull had been breached.

Paying the body parts a cursory glance, the boy turned his attention to the consoles. They still had power. Just the occasional brown-out and sputter where the cyborg zombies had chewed through the data insulation. He checked over the displays quickly but methodically, noting anything that pertained to an inventory or an equipment manifest. Food. Fuel. Weapons. Material. The boy tugged ruefully on the pauldron of his armour, able now to fit all four fingers of his right hand through the bite that the cyborg zombie had taken out of the plate. A repair was long overdue anyway. His body had not stopped growing yet, and he had already started to outgrow the plate.

The downed super-heavy certainly represented metal enough to rebuild the entire harness, but only if he could hold it, which he knew he could not.

The cyborg zombies would just be the beginning. Every ghoul and reaver with an auspex unit and a taste for metal would be drawn to a carcass this large and the boy knew that even he could not fight them all.

The northern tundras taught a boy to be strong, but they also taught him to be wise, to fight only the battles that he could win and to forget those that he could not.

Chewing thoughtfully on the digits of a hand that he had torn from one of the cyborg zombies in passing, the boy tapped at a likely looking display. Operating the data interface felt almost akin to an instinct. In the same way that he had emerged from the wreckage of Karaashi knowing how to fight and how to survive, he somehow understood the belligerent pictorial text by which he could navigate the crawler’s computer system. It was as if it had been purposefully designed and built for his mind. Or his mind had been purposefully designed and built for these systems. The boy called up what looked like a blueprint, enduring the agonising lag intervals as the simplistic interface intelligence rerouted his requests to bypass cannibalised pathways.

He tapped on the image as it finally manifested.

The screen fuzzed.

There was a strong room in the middle of the crawler, at the furthest point from the exterior, equidistant between the critical locations of the engine plant at the rear and the drive room at the front. According to the schematics in front of him it had its own parallel power supply, environment shielding, and instrumentarium.

If there was anything of value here worth scavenging then it would be there.

The boy punched the glass from the terminal, then ripped out the interface panel. He had already memorised the schematics and did not want to risk something or someone else finding the same information and cornering him in the tight passages of the hulk. Finishing off the zombie hand, his teeth grinding on bone, the boy spat metal nuggets into his own hand to stow for later.

Then he took up his bardiche and crawled back into the corridor.

There were six more cyborg zombies.

Two scratched at the blast doors like mechwolves at a dirt grave. Another licked and gnawed at the control systems. Its electro-stimmed strength and undead patience had succeeded in tearing away the fascia panels, but the door lock's cryptex keys looked several orders of magnitude of complexity beyond the zombie's basic decryption wetware. The last three ate the lumes from the bulkhead sconces and the ceiling tubes. The few remaining lights flickered with their last life, casting the feasting zombies like the cyborganimated nightmares they were.

On open ground the boy could take six. But in close confines like these, his armour already hanging off him like foil strips, he was not so confident. Not confident enough to charge headlong into another battle.

But whatever was in that strong room that they wanted, *he* wanted.

The boy unclipped a grenade canister from his bandolier and rolled it into the anteroom.

It clattered over the riveted wall-cum-floor, six sets of sense-augmetics swivelling towards the sound. He had picked it up from a wreck like this one, albeit much older, picked bare, forcing the boy to dig just for that much, but it had proven its value. He used it to carry water. When he had water. Now it was empty, but for a few grains of sand, but the cyborg zombies could not know that. Their sense-augmetics perceived a grenade,

and their scavenger routines reacted to it accordingly.

Tracking the canister with their ‘eyes’ they lurched out of the way, unbunching from the immediate vicinity of the blast doors and turning their backs as the boy entered.

A scything blow from the bardiche beheaded the zombie nearest to the corridor. The boy took one more step inside, turning, using the combined momentum as he shortened the grip on his bardiche, wielding it like a sickle, and ripped it across the zombie’s midriff. Ropes of atrophied intestine spilled from the cyborg’s belly. The force of the blade’s exit dragged the zombie forwards, lifted it a centimetre from the bulkhead. Flesh tore away from metal as the construct’s abdomen sailed another metre after the boy’s blade. Its legs folded to the bulkhead. The boy spun the bardiche back under control, turned again, then delivered an uppercut that carved a second zombie in two from groin to cranium. One half slumped to the ground, dead meat weighted with lead. The other spasmed in epileptic overload as it dragged itself with one arm and one leg towards the boy.

By then, the other four had updated their algorithms.

The air took on a tang of charge as electro-stimm grafts fired, filling the ante-chamber with the smell of soured meat and reheated blood. There was a pop of autopropellant as the nearest one still standing threw itself at the boy.

He raised his bardiche like a barrier. The flying zombie smashed into it. Raw momentum forced it onto him. The boy backpedalled as it champed over the haft for his face. He roared, turning his upper body and driving the zombie up against the wall. Leaning into it, he relieved one foot, kicked back. The bone of his heel connected with a zombie’s pectoral plating and knocked it to the ground. It fell on top of the bifurcated cyborg that was still crawling towards him, effectively terminating its spasms.

The boy drew the bardiche across the cyborg he held pinned to the wall. Electrical discharge and sluggish fluid systems gushed from its chest as the boy back-handed the blade into the shoulder of another creature. Encased in thin plates of some ultra-dense metamaterial, the transdimensional blade simply banged off it. The actual damage might have been minimal, but the boy was strong enough that the force of the collision alone was enough to send the zombie sprawling.

The boy made a mental note to return for that shoulder plating after the

battle was done.

Moaning cyborgs converged on him from all sides.

Three left.

He bit, kicked, chewed, butted, ripped metal and flesh from decaying bodies even as their energy-wreathed talons tore at his. Brute strength dislodged one against a wall, threw off another, gave him a handful of moments in which to beat one to total shutdown before the other two could recharge and return. One was marginally swifter, leaping back on spring-blades. The boy caught it by the metal protrusions of its chest-plates. Turning his wrist palm-up he made a fist, and then with the strength of one arm and a cry of rage drove the zombie's head through the shattered lume sconce in the bulkhead above them. The boy let go as electricity jagged through the cyborg's body, animating it for one last flurry of kicks. The last zombie was still running at the boy as he backed off. He stamped down on its leg. He timed it perfectly. The zombie's metal-plated shin snapped in mid-charge, crashing it into the bulkhead and slewing it across the boy before he skewered its spinal cord with his bardiche. A flurry of up-and-down strokes walked the crooked length of its spine until all four of its limbs lost motor control.

Its jaw continued to gnash at the bulkhead, but the boy could live with that.

The boy took a deep breath, then bent to wrench the exotic metal sheath from the fallen zombie's shoulder. He attached it to his belt, then moved to crouch over the control console embedded in the 'floor' by the blast doors.

The zombies' unsubtle attempts at decryption had done little to damage the core hardware. The doors were an adamantium alloy sheathed with some kind of energy dampening ceramic, designed to withstand a melta bomb or a chain fist or even a ramming by another armoured vehicle. That kind of durability would hardly have been worth the value of the materials involved if the underlying systems could be forced so easily.

A cursory examination revealed several layers of defence around the core spirit, a series of biochemical and genetic keys providing the initial authentication screen before expanding to present a string of increasingly hostile runephrase and pattern recognition demands. The cyborg zombies would not have broken its encryptions in a thousand years of trying. If the boy, or whatever else would be drawn to the vehicle after him, had not

intervened then they would very likely have continued to attack the door lock with basic combinations until their bodies crumbled around their working brains.

It took the boy about five minutes.

The fight beforehand was only marginally less challenging.

There was a clunk of disengaging locks and the blast doors hissed open.

The boy stepped inside.

The walls were lined with aluminium shelving, bolted to the walls in order to keep them and their contents secure over harsh and changeable terrain. It had presumably worked too, before the crawler had been thrown onto its side, dumping tins and jars and packets of dried food onto the bulkhead. With his foot, the boy sifted through his haul. He smiled. It was food and water, mostly. There were also some medicae supplies and ammunition clips, neither of which he had any great use for, but added to the metal he could scavenge from the blast doors and the zombies, plus some of the instrumentation from the sense nest to upgrade his own auspex unit, then this would have proven a worthwhile expenditure of energy and time.

The boy toed a packet of dehydrated protein bars from another corpse.

This one was better preserved than the last. His white skin, black hair, and the hand-sewn leather panels of his clothing remained uneaten. Only the crater in his back and the ring of curdled, melted tissue that surrounded it spoke of an unpleasant end.

‘Drop the spear…’

He looked up from the ground, and froze.

A woman in scuffed black exo-armour crouched behind a small barricade of tins at the other side of the strong room. She was holding a weapon that fell somewhere in the grey categorisation zone between a heavy pistol and a compact assault weapon, all twitching vanes and bulky power cells.

The boy was fluent in over a dozen languages.

He had mastered the inscrutable linguaforms of the storm giants, translated the hieroglyph code of the great tomb computers, the tongues of past and future and of the realm beyond, where machine-spirits dreamed, but he had never heard the words of mortal flesh spoken until then.

‘You are… like me.’

‘Throw it on the ground.’ She emphasised her grip on the trigger. ‘You can

drop whatever you have in those belt pouches too.’

The boy looked down at his belt. He looked back up.

‘No.’

‘I am holding the gun.’

The boy smiled. His eyes were as cold as silver.

He opened his mouth to speak again, to remind her that her crawler had been ambushed and immobilised, overrun by cyborg zombies, the basest vermin in the lands of shadow, and that she had been trapped in her own strong room. He would then have pointed out to her, for the boy did believe in fair warning, that with the charge level indicated by the colour gauges on the pistol’s casing she would have at best one shot, one shot that she would in all likelihood miss, before he crushed that gun along with the bones of her hand. Considering the weapon, however, he hesitated. It was a plasma talon. He looked again at the marks on the body on the floor. He recalled the damage to the outer hull. He noted that the woman was wearing exo-armour. Both of the corpses he had passed inside of the vehicle had been clad more simply.

‘You are not one of the crew. You were one of the attackers.’

The woman took a step forwards. ‘I said *drop* the spear.’

His smile broadened.

‘Last warning,’ she snarled.

‘What is your name?’ the boy asked.

‘What do you care?’

The boy considered the truth of that, and nodded.

‘It took strength to bring down a vehicle this size. Its crew were too confident in its power. It made them weak.’ He glanced at the bardiche in his hand, then threw it down. ‘Take it. You have earned it. I do not need it.’

The woman’s gaze flicked to the discarded weapon, then up again. Her pistol’s aim stayed fixed on the boy’s face. The bars of glare on her visor masked her expression.

‘You could come with me,’ she said. ‘Between the cannibals and the crew I’m the last one left. My clan could use someone like you.’

The boy gave it thought.

He shook his head.

‘What is *your* name?’ she said.

‘There is something I still have to do. When it is done… When it is done,

perhaps I will be able to tell you.’

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THE VERDICT OF THE SCYTHE

David Annandale

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Death closed in on Absyrtus like the mailed fist of a god. A fleet of grey ships, each of them powerful enough to lay waste to a world, shouldered through the planet's defence systems as if they weren't even there. Orbital platforms fired beam weapons pointlessly into void shields that barely flickered. The god's hand smashed the platforms aside contemptuously. It reached low anchor and struck its blow.

At the head of the attack was a ship three kilometres long. It was the *Fourth Horseman*. No void ship this large should have still been descending, but the attack barque was heading for the planet's surface. Already, its heat shields were glowing red as it burned its way down through the mesosphere. It was brutish, merciless, unyielding.

Mortarion stood on the bridge of the *Fourth Horseman*, his eyes on the main viewport, waiting for the murky clouds below to part and expose his prey to his sight.

'Drop pods launched,' a vox-officer called out. 'Storm Eagle flights away.'

Mortarion gave a bare nod of acknowledgment. He already knew. He had given the commands, and his Death Guard obeyed them as perfectly as if every ship and every legionary were extensions of his body. The hail of landings striking downwards was the sweep of his scythe. The Death Guard acted as a single entity, animated by his will.

The *Fourth Horseman* plunged through the roiling clouds, searing them with its passage. The deck vibrated as the gigantic ship descended, the

planet’s atmosphere burning as it pushed back against the adamantine monster. The attack barque began to slow, but its landfall would still be a deathblow.

As if defeated, the clouds parted. The city of Temnis appeared far below, a sprawling web, its walls no more than a gossamer perimeter thread. There were faint sparks on the wall’s length as its guns opened up on the approaching colossus.

Standing beside the primarch, Calas Typhon said, ‘I can’t imagine they think that artillery will slow us down.’

‘That is a gesture of defiance, not a tactic,’ said Mortarion. ‘Their primary defence will come at closer range, after we land.’

‘Their sorcery,’ Typhon said quietly.

‘Their crime and their death sentence.’

When the Death Guard had been tasked with bringing Absyrtus into compliance, Mortarion had gone over the data-slates reporting conditions on the world with cold, tightening anger. Absyrtus was an echo of Barbarus, with a sorcerous ruling class in power. Its physical conditions were harsh, and if they were not as toxic as those on Barbarus, that hardly mattered. It was the enslavement of the population by sorcery that had summoned his wrath. This was humanity’s great torment. There would never be true freedom in the galaxy until its last traces had been exterminated.

Liberation came through death. There was no other recourse for the poison that held Absyrtus in its grip.

‘What vox traffic from the other population centres?’ Mortarion called out.

‘We are picking up signs of alarm, but no organised response, Lord Primarch. Most of the traffic is calls for help and requests for instruction.’

Mortarion nodded again. This was as he had expected. Temnis was the centre of life on Absyrtus in every respect. ‘Their centre will not hold,’ he said. ‘Without it, all will fall apart.’

The city gathered definition in the viewport. Its precise contours had been unknown until now. It had been shielded by the thick cloud cover, and the reports of scouts had been badly incomplete. Now it was open to Mortarion’s gaze. It stood upon a group of low hills. On a rise in the eastern sector was the largest complex. That would be the seat of the planet’s government.

It was time to decide where the *Fourth Horseman* would hit.

‘Do we strike the heart?’ Typhon asked.

It was what they had done on Galaspar. The attack barque had smashed into the primary hive like a glaive chopping into a wasp nest, and its troops had poured in, purging resistance with fire. If the *Fourth Horseman* aimed for the complex on the hill, it would hit the regime with the impact of an asteroid.

Galaspar. Mortarion’s most signal victory, the one where he had shown what his Legion could and *would* do to bring a war to an end, and the conquest that had earned stinging rebukes from his brothers. They had not been there a year ago. They had not read the battlefield as he had. They would not have brought the war to such a sudden and total halt as he did. By fighting as brutally as he had, he had liberated a hundred billion citizens from the tyranny of the Order. And yet. There was that look in his father’s eyes. The look that haunted him now.

Galaspar was not Barbarus, and Absyrtus was not Galaspar. Temnis was a fraction of the size of the Galaspar hives. It had nowhere near the same level of defence. Mortarion was here to liberate humanity. He came to destroy a regime. He was not here to exterminate a planet.

Bringing the *Fourth Horseman* down on that complex would break the spine of Absyrtus’ defences in an instant. But the sector was densely populated. It had the highest concentration of structures in the entire city. Slaughter was necessary in war…

‘But not always,’ Mortarion whispered to himself.

‘Lord Primarch?’ Typhon asked.

Mortarion ignored him. ‘That is a space port,’ he said, pointing to an area to the west of the complex. It was flat, paved, and sat between the hills. ‘Take us down there.’ It was a worthwhile strategic target, and the civilian population would be sparse.

This will be enough, Mortarion thought. His eyes moved over the contours of the city. He saw where the drop pods would land outside the wall, the barracks on the inside that the gunships would attack and destroy before landing their troops, and the impact the *Fourth Horseman* would have at the space port. *This will be more than enough*.

The attack barque changed orientation as it drew closer to the surface, and Temnis disappeared from the viewport. Mortarion turned his eyes to the vid-feed above it. Temnis seemed to rush towards its conqueror. Mortarion

stretched out his hand. The fingers of his gauntlet hooked like talons to claim the prey. This was how he would take the city. This was how he *was* taking the city, even now. As his orders were executed, he knew what happened at every landing site, even before the reports reached the ship.

He was there as the drop pods came down in force outside the main gates, and his legionaries began their steady, unwavering march on the defences. He was there as the Storm Eagles' Vengeance rocket launchers turned the barracks into smoking craters, and there when the gunships landed, unleashing another tide of warriors who closed on the walls from the other side. And he was here in the *Fourth Horseman* as it thundered down on the space port, three kilometres of brutish ship, melting the rockcrete with the down blast of its engines and its superheated hull, crushing the feeble vessels of Temnis beneath its landing gear. The attack barque's massive guns turned the tanks that approached from the outskirts of the space port into molten ruins.

'Sorcerers on the walls,' the vox-officer warned. 'Spatial distortions reported. Warp bolts hitting our troops.'

'Burn them out,' Mortarion said. 'Burn them all out.'

He did not have to be present to know that his Deathshroud Terminators were obeying his command by hurling phosphex bombs onto the walls. He knew that crawling, green fire was melting the flesh from bones all along the ramparts of Temnis. He knew that sorcery was meeting an end that, no matter how agonising, was more merciful than it deserved.

The struggle ended before Mortarion, Typhon and the leading ranks of the First Great Company had reached the bottom of the attack barque's troop ramps.

'Lord Primarch,' the vox-officer called. *'We are receiving a request for a cease fire.'*

'Patch it through,' Mortarion said coldly. He had not granted one on Galaspar. Let his brothers think what they would. He was conducting this war, and he knew best. He had taken the measures he needed to liberate the population.

And yet… and yet… The look in father's eyes…

His vox-bead crackled in his ear. Then a desperate voice spoke.

'This is Queen Cirkesce of Absyrtus. We beg you to accept our surrender. Whatever your terms are, we accept them without reservation. Only spare

our people. Please, spare our people.'

Mortarion hesitated. Beside him, Typhon stirred, also receiving messages.

'The enemy is laying down arms across the city,' Typhon said. 'Our foe is surrendering.'

'Without terms,' said Mortarion. This was not Galaspar. When the Order had sued for peace, its goal had been self-preservation. This ruler was pleading for her people. The situation was not the same. Not at all.

'Do we continue, Lord Primarch?' Typhon asked.

What are you? Mortarion asked himself. His instinct was to continue to prosecute the battle until no enemy was left. This was a regime that used sorcery. It needed to vanish. Now it seemed that it was willing to do so.

A new path opened up before Mortarion. It was not one he had ever conceived of as possible. It might be for Roboute. It certainly was for Vulkan. Not for Konrad, though. And never for himself. But here it was. There was nothing to fight. The enemy was pleading to surrender. If he continued to prosecute the war, what would he become?

'Great lord, spare my people,' came the voice on the bead again.

Mortarion clenched his teeth. He did not answer the voice. He switched the channel to the command network and issued a new order. 'Cease fire,' he said, and he arrested the sweep of the scythe.

Legionaries lined both sides of the street leading to the entrance of the royal palace. The building was at the centre of the complex Mortarion had identified during the *Fourth Horseman*'s descent. It was built of soot-darkened limestone, a soaring spire rising up every hundred metres along its circular wall. The stonework was elaborately wrought, but had been eaten away by acid rain over time, and not been repaired. The windows were dull, leaded glass.

Mortarion walked up the gentle slope of the boulevard with Typhon and an escort of the Deathshroud honour guard. The queen of Absyrtus waited for them at the entrance to the palace. The doors were wide open. She was alone.

'I do not understand why we have left this place standing,' Typhon said.

'Because it was not necessary to destroy it,' Mortarion told him. The words felt strange to utter. He was not sure he believed them. But he needed to put them to the test.

‘Are you sure of this?’ Typhon asked, as if reading his mind.

‘I intend to be. One way or the other.’

There was the sound of a crowd from somewhere in the near distance, but there was no one on the streets on this side of the palace. The facades of the buildings along the street were dark and empty.

As Mortarion approached the palace doors, the queen bowed low.

‘You are welcome, Lord Mortarion,’ she said. ‘This house is now yours, to do with as you see fit. In gratitude for your mercy, grant me the honour of letting me be your guide.’ There was nothing but deference in her manner, yet there was little of the awe Mortarion was used to in other mortals, as if there were something else that had already claimed her capacity for wonder. She was an older woman, her hair white, a delicate tracery of wrinkles surrounding her lips and eyes. Her face was strong, and her eyes were a deep shade of green. Her gaze was open and frank, and did not seem to mind the obvious distaste with which Mortarion regarded her. Her robes, though handsome, were relatively simple. They were a bit worn on the hems and sleeves, as if much work was done while wearing them. They were dark, with sigils embroidered in gold thread. Mortarion frowned when he saw them, but at least she was not dissembling.

Behind Cirkesce, the entrance hall of the palace was empty. The surrender appeared to be total. She was throwing herself on Mortarion’s mercy. He was not yet convinced that he had any.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘Show me.’

Cirkesce bowed again in thanks, and led the way into the palace. After the entrance hall, they began to encounter servants. Mortarion watched them closely. They were not cowed by the presence of their queen. It was clear that it was he who frightened them. They were turning to Cirkesce for reassurance. She smiled gently at each one she passed. She kept murmuring, ‘All will be well, all will be well,’ to them, like a mother soothing an anxious child before sleep.

This is not Barbarus, Mortarion thought. *This is not Barbarus at all*. He glanced at Typhon. The First Captain had kept his helmet on and walked on stolidly, facing forwards, keeping his views to himself.

Cirkesce took them through the main chambers of the palace. She took special care to show them two spaces. One was the council hall, now sitting empty. The other was a chapel. It was in the centre of the palace, circular,

like the building, and was the only chamber in the palace that appeared to be fully cared for. In the middle of its floor was an altar. It was rectangular, but its lines were strangely curved. It appeared to be in motion, as if the stone were a cross section of a wave. It was hard to look at directly, and in the corner of the eye, it seemed to twist. The walls, floor and ceiling were polished black marble, with runes in silver inlay that seemed to flow from Cirkesce's robes into the stone.

'This is our place of ritual,' the queen said.

'No more,' said Mortarion. 'You have been apprised of the articles of compliance?'

'I have.'

'And you accept them?'

'I do.'

'You understand there is no place in the Imperium for such rituals.'

'I do.'

'Your people will no longer be subject to rule by sorcery.'

He thought there might have been the smallest hesitation before she agreed again. He wasn't sure.

'This chamber will be destroyed,' he continued.

'I understand.'

The ritual hall was in the lowest level of the palace. The queen now led them up grand flights of stairs to the uppermost floor.

'The people await you, Lord Mortarion,' Cirkesce said.

She brought them through a wide, airy chamber to a balcony overlooking a great square. Here was the crowd that Mortarion had heard earlier. The citizens of Temnis had gathered in the tens of thousands, anxious faces staring up at the balcony. Cirkesce stepped forwards, and when she was greeted with a grateful cry, Mortarion saw how truly, utterly different the relationship between the rulers and the ruled on Absyrtus was from what it had been on Barbarus.

'Fear not!' Cirkesce called to the crowd. 'All will be well. You have been afraid, but let the fear pass. The war is over, peace has returned, and we are now taking our place in the Imperium of Man. Do not think we have been conquered, for we were wrong to fight. We should have been welcoming our new destiny with open arms, so let us do so now! All will be well! All *is* well!'

She invited Mortarion to come forwards. He stared down at the thousands of faces. They gazed with adoration at the queen, and then, taking their cue from her, turned with hope to him. No one had ever looked at him in quite that way. He felt odd, as if he were an imposter. He was not sure if the pretence was directed at the people of Absyrtus or at himself.

Mortarion was still wondering the same thing hours later when, with the Deathshroud standing behind him, he and Typhon sat on stone seats, honoured guests in the banquet hall of the royal palace, at a celebration of peace and union. He did not want to be here. He understood that people had a need for such a ritual, but he did not share that need, and he disliked the clamour and frivolity attendant upon the event. He sat opposite the queen, at one end of a huge table, long enough for thirty of the monarch's councillors and ministers.

The evening had consisted of one speech after another, each longer than the one before, all of them bland variations on the same obsequious theme. Over and over, Mortarion was assured of the gratitude of the people for the mercy he had shown, and of the utter loyalty and compliance of Absyrtus' government. Cirkesce caught Mortarion's eye every so often and smiled in sympathy. Then she turned back to the speakers, the smile becoming parental and indulgent.

The servility of these people, and the total capitulation, grated on Mortarion. He had no doubt every word was meant. They seemed so weak, it was hard to imagine that they had ever represented the smallest threat.

But they did fight. They were prepared to resist until they saw that their efforts would be futile. They knew they could not defeat us, and so gave up immediately. Does that make them intelligent or cowardly? Either way, he wished they were less voluble.

Typhon seemed no happier. He sat on Mortarion's right, resolutely silent, regarding the food and drink with glowering resignation. 'So this is what we have saved.' He spoke quietly enough so only Mortarion heard.

'Would you prefer compliance to have had a higher cost?'

Typhon shrugged. 'Is this who we are?' he asked.

'We must be shaped by our purpose, and not the other way around,' said Mortarion. The words rang false. He was taking steps down a path that many of his brothers would embrace, and that he believed his father would

choose for him. He was not sure of his footing, though. The way ahead was unclear.

He went on. ‘Our purpose is the liberation of humanity.’ Of that, at least, he was sure. ‘Death is not the only form of liberation.’

‘No,’ Typhon conceded. ‘But what if it is the form that *ours* takes?’

Mortarion thought for a moment, then shook his head. He had no good answer for Typhon.

‘What have we saved?’ Typhon asked. ‘Do we know that?’

‘I will learn tonight,’ Mortarion told him. ‘I will walk the streets of this city. I will learn its true nature.’

‘Like the Lords Fulgrim and Guilliman.’

‘No. Not like them. They do not look with my eyes.’

Mortarion walked the night. At his command, the Deathshroud held back the full forty-nine steps behind him. He wanted space to be alone with his thoughts.

He left the environs of the palace and headed south-west down its slope, into the densest of the residential sectors. There were celebrations everywhere, as if the war had lasted years instead of hours. Mortarion skirted their edges, coming close enough to get a sense of the revels, and then moving on. News of who he was had spread quickly, and all who saw him paused in their feasting and dancing to bow before him, pressing foreheads to the ground, calling out their praise and thanks. They had none of the practised formulations of the politicians, but they were just as ingratiating. Mortarion said nothing, his lip curling in disgust as he left the grovelling wretches behind.

He took streets at random, choosing smaller and smaller alleys, wandering in and out of cul-de-sacs. The hab complexes were low, none more than five storeys high. Like the palace, their walls were blackened with filth. The air was greasy, and tasted of the soot it carried from the industrial regions and blanketed over the city.

The windows of the buildings were close together, suggesting tiny, cramped dwellings. There were impromptu celebrations here too, but also many faces at the windows, looking down on the grey spectre and his grim escort that walked in their midst. The people in the streets abased themselves to him, but those at the windows stared silently, or ducked away.

Is this liberation? Is there value in these lives?

Perhaps there was. He was not seeing it, though. What he was seeing was a facade. He was seeing no more into the truth of these people than he was into their dwellings. The further he walked, the more he felt that what he had witnessed since arriving on Absyrtus was a brittle surface.

Things were wrong, though he could not see what yet. The same was true of this path he had chosen to try. He was growing more and more certain that he was making a mistake.

Is that what I truly believe? Or what I want to believe?

He didn't know. He needed certainty. And so he kept walking, and kept looking, willing the night to show him what he needed to know.

The dwellings became poorer the further down the hill he went. When he reached the base, he was in the slum areas. The habs crowded closer together. The people were shabbier, and the streets as empty as they were narrow and winding. Mortarion paused at the entrance to an alleyway that was so cramped, the blank walls of the buildings on either side almost brushed his shoulders. A sound had caught his ear. He heard a child crying, and what at first he had taken for a mother singing a lullaby.

She wasn't singing. She was chanting.

Mortarion walked down the alleyway, moving through the darkness towards the sounds. He stopped at a doorway. It was barely visible, the opening a maw of greater night. 'Wait at the palace,' he told the Deathshroud. He ducked low and crossed the threshold.

Refuse crunched under his boots. The stinking corridor turned at sharp angles, making no architectural sense. After the second turn, the darkness began to give way to a dull red glow. The chanting grew louder. The voice rasped and gurgled. The child's cries became more shrill. There was no comfort here.

Mortarion rounded another corner, and stepped into a low-ceilinged room. Tattered books crowded on sagging shelves. Incomprehensible carvings were scattered over every level space. They were, Mortarion thought, worse than the products of a disordered mind. There was a consistency to their insanity. They were the icons of delusional belief. There was an altar in the centre of the floor. It was a crudely hewn block of rockcrete, but it was clearly a product of the same faith as the altar in the royal palace. Despite the indifferent skill with which it had been made, it had some of the same

strange suggestion of fluidity in stone.

An old woman bent over the altar, chanting harsh, slithering words. Strands of lank, grey hair hung from her. She was clad in rags, the patchwork worn with pride, another symbol of the tyranny of superstition that clung so ferociously to humanity.

There was no child in the room. As the woman chanted, stone flames flickered into being over the altar, wavered, then vanished. The cries came from the flames during their evanescent lives. The air pulsed with the possibilities of creation.

A psyker, one given over to the madness her very existence made inevitable. Mortarion's jaw tightened in disgust.

The woman finished her chant and looked up at Mortarion. She smiled. One eye was pale, covered in cataracts. The other was clear. It gazed at him with a sharp, knowing expression that Mortarion now realised he had seen in Cirkesce's eyes at the banquet.

'Have you come to join me?' the woman asked with a whispering taunt. She showed no fear. She was violating the edicts of the compliance, and the commands of her queen. Perhaps she did not know about the new realities of Absyrtus, but Mortarion was sure she did. There was too much mockery in her gaze for her not to.

This creature was everything he strove to purge from the galaxy. She distorted reality around her. It would be a mistake, though, simply to destroy her and leave. There was something here he must know.

'I came to learn the truth of Absyrtus,' he said.

'Then you have found it.'

'What are you?'

'The one who does not hide.'

'There are others like you who hide.'

'All others,' she said, and cackled. 'Do you believe in surrender, great lord?'

'No,' he said. That was the easiest truth he had spoken in many hours.

'No. Neither does Absyrtus. It believes in survival.'

'Which you are dooming through your words.'

The woman ran a clawed finger across the altar, and the stone flowed like water, spiralling into beckoning patterns. 'There is nothing here that you can end,' she said.

‘You are mistaken.’

‘I think not.’ The woman smiled and smiled and smiled.

Mortarion left, then. He did not kill her. Not yet. He needed to determine how deeply the infection she represented had spread. As he walked from her hovel, she whispered, ‘Listen, Mortarion of Barbarus. Listen well.’

Mortarion listened. He looked. He did both with renewed suspicion. He made his way slowly back to the royal palace, and Temnis was transformed. He had already made a new judgement before he stepped back into the alleyway. The path he had tried to walk was the wrong one. The attempt to do so had blinded him.

No longer. There were psykers everywhere, consumed by the irrationality they had embraced. They infested this world like a plague. Mortarion heard now the fragments of whispers that crawled into the night from the windows of the hab complexes. He saw the strange patterns scratched into the soot in shadowed corners of buildings. When he passed celebrations in the distance, and the participants did not see him, he saw the dances that were too frenzied. He saw the light of the fires bend unnaturally.

And he heard, from the darkest streets, the child’s cry of the flames.

Typhon and the Deathshroud were waiting for him at the entrance to the palace when he returned. They saw what was written on his face. He did not have to say a word. They took up arms and marched with him, heading back to the Land Raiders that would return them to the space port and to the *Fourth Horseman*. Mortarion looked back once as they left the palace. On the top floor, lights blazed from the vast windows of the throne room. They silhouetted Cirkesce.

You tried a different kind of sorcery. It won’t save you either.

He said nothing on the journey, except to issue a terse command recalling all troops to their landing ships and ordering a return to the orbiting fleet. The take-off of the *Fourth Horseman* turned night into day across Temnis, the fires of its rise even more terrible than those of its descent.

Mortarion broke his silence at last when he and Typhon were on the bridge once more, watching the city diminish below, and then disappear beneath the clouds.

‘Ask me what you want to know,’ he said.

‘What did you see? Are we abandoning a conquest?’

‘I saw the truth. I saw that you were right, Calas. The liberation we bring is death. There is nothing here to conquer. There is nothing to give to this world except death.’

‘The compliance was a sham?’

‘It was. The sorcery of this world is not the tool of its tyrants. It infects its society from top to bottom. There is nothing to be saved.’ He paused, turning to the weapons officers. ‘Ready cyclonic torpedoes.’

‘By your command, Lord Primarch.’

‘Humans must be freed from sorcery,’ Mortarion said to Typhon. ‘But they cannot be reasoned out of it. So we must purge it by whatever means possible. What cannot be saved, must be turned into an example.’

‘Will examples be enough?’ Typhon asked.

‘Not on their own. The force that creates the examples must be known. And it must be without mercy.’

The *Fourth Horseman* reached orbit. The sphere of Absyrtus turned slowly before Mortarion. Its clouds no longer concealed anything from him. He saw clearly. He saw the path that was his. It was the one that had always been his.

‘Cyclonic torpedoes standing by, Lord Primarch,’ the officer reported.

He had halted the swing of his scythe. He would complete the strike now, and he would never hesitate again.

You must become Death.

If he had to be the greater horror in order to save humanity from itself, then that would be the burden he would shoulder.

‘Launch torpedoes,’ he said. ‘Turn that planet into a cinder.’

He watched the streak of the torpedoes burning into the atmosphere, and they were his hand too. He was reaching down to Absyrtus. With his scythe, he was bringing his verdict.

It was, he now knew, the only verdict he would ever give.

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A GAME OF OPPOSITES

Guy Haley

OceanofPDF.com

Confounding the foe is one sure way to victory. When this strategy is pursued, war becomes a game of opposites and expectations.

At all times, present your enemy with the reverse of the truth. When you are vulnerable, appear strong, when you are strong, appear vulnerable. When close by your enemy, appear far from him, and when far away, appear close by. Weakness may thus be turned into strength.

A cunning strategist will show the enemy a mirror image of the truth, but the master strategist will accord his lies with his enemy's expectations. Learn what your enemy believes of you. Present that image to him at all times. In using his intelligence as a cloak, you might hide your intentions, and strike as a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky.

– Jaghatai Khan
Tenets of War

OceanofPDF.com

The Storm Eagle hovered uncertainly over the mountainside. The site landing pad had been taken out in the attack, forcing the ship to put down directly onto the slope. Its engines whined, struggling to keep it over the flattest part of the terrain in the strong crosswind. After five minutes shifting from side to side, the Storm Eagle touched down awkwardly. Landing claws gouged white scratches into rock as they slipped. Engines howled again, pushing the ship back into position. Tentatively, the machine sank into its hydraulics. The engines cycled down and finally cut out. The craft sat unmoving a moment, wind screeching around its body.

The front ramp opened slowly, as if the Storm Eagle feared knocking itself from its precarious perch. Red light spilled out into the dim afternoon. An angry voice, distorted by the voxmitter of early pattern power armour, came with it.

‘Curse it all, can this landing sequence go any more slowly?’

‘The landing area is unsafe, Warsmith Xyrokles.’ The second had the long-suffering air of a man often criticised.

‘Always got an answer, Phideark,’ growled Xyrokles. ‘It is one of your least attractive habits.’

‘Yes, Warsmith.’

‘And stop agreeing with me when I insult you. A dignified silence is more becoming.’

‘Yes, Warsmith.’

Within the ship a group of Iron Warriors waited for the ramp's cautious descent. The Warsmith stepped out as soon as the edge bit the mountainside. The slope was such that the ramp was angled awkwardly, and not all of the toothed lip made contact with the ground. The ship creaked ominously. Xyrokles looked up sharply at the tilted prow.

'Steady, my brothers,' he said. 'It would be embarrassing if we lost our ship to heavy footsteps.'

As lightly as a transhuman can move in power armour, the Iron Warriors disembarked, fanning out along the slope, guns ready. Xyrokles stomped ahead of them, his heavy boots slipping on the loose rock.

'What are you doing?' he said, waving at his warriors impatiently. 'Quickly! If they are still up there we are all dead.' He looked up at the construction site. 'We are sitting targets here. Who trained you fools? Get up to the ridge, cover Phideark and me! Go!' He waved them forwards. The servo-arm mounted on his power plant half extended with his irritation. The warriors lumbered up the mountainside. Xyrokles and Phideark followed.

'What a mess,' Xyrokles said when they crested the brow.

'They have done a thorough job, my lord,' said Phideark.

'Shut up, Phideark,' snapped Xyrokles. He stamped on. The level ground the construction teams had so painfully cut from the mountainside was cratered and fouled with construction machinery carefully positioned before being destroyed to prevent landing there.

Xyrokles waited for his bodyguards to fan out further before venturing on. He stopped again, shaking his head at a collection of new buildings, now all in flames. Black smoke twisted sideways in the wind.

'Everything, command centre, landing pad, comms arrays. All of it gone.'

A massive turret, which had been close to completion, had been levelled with melta-charges. Bubbled flows of melted plascrete clung to the slopes, frozen quickly in the mountain chill.

Fires from the construction site blew flat along the ground, only their ferocity keeping them from being blown out.

'This happened recently,' said Xyrokles. 'What was the exact time contact was lost?'

'Fifty-second segment, four hundredth millichron,' Phideark said faithfully.

'A few hours ago at most. These fires are still burning.' Xyrokles looked

up at the mountainside where fresh craters made white starbursts fringed in black on the reddish stone. ‘Those bastards are probably still up there, watching us.’

‘I detect no power sources from active vehicles or war-plate.’

‘It means nothing.’ Xyrokles moved on, skirting a burned out earth mover slumped into the remains of its tracks. ‘All this work, all wrecked, a week away from the installation of the primary armament.’

They spotted the first bodies near the outer defence lines. A firing line of Iron Warriors lay scattered by a missile hit. More were dead behind the short parapet guarding the principal blast doors, their wounds unmistakably inflicted by power weapons.

‘There’s one of theirs,’ Phideark pointed.

‘Shut up, Phideark. Shut up, shut up now. I am trying to think,’ said Xyrokles. He went over to the dead warrior anyway. ‘Typical hit and run tactics.’ He kicked the dead warrior’s chest-plate. His gunmetal boot made a dull sound on the white ceramite. ‘White Scars! I knew it was too good to be true when Harkaton said he’d driven off their warfleet. That attack on the outer solar line was a distraction to allow the slippery *cheminerikoi* to sneak in here.’ He used an Olympian profanity with no true parallel in Gothic. There were several near translations of varying levels of offensiveness. ‘But if they snuck in, it means their strength will be low. A raiding party, come to make our lives difficult – well, they’ll regret it.’ He stared up at the fire gutting the command post, and shook his head again. ‘Have you alerted the other sites?’

‘Yes, Warsmith, as requested.’ He paused. ‘Site five has been hit. Similar timing to this.’

Xyrokles swore. Phideark stood stoically by as his commander worked his way through five city-states’-worth of gutterspeak.

‘The same result?’

‘The same. Total destruction.’

‘Damn it all, Phideark!’ He looked down to the Storm Eagle. ‘What’s that still doing there? Order the ship up. Do I have to do everything? It’s vulnerable. Tell the men to start site recovery.’

‘Shall we begin reconstruction?’

Xyrokles snorted. ‘No. The enemy will keep knocking down every castella we put up. It’s a wearying game. We need to deal with them before we can

deal with that.’ He pointed at the burning complex.

‘Then what are your orders, my lord? Shall I order patrols out around the site?’

‘Are you joking with me, Phideark?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘Then attempt more workable suggestions!’

‘Then, we defend.’

‘Also idiotic. They will hit us and hit us and hit us, that’s what these savages do. We can build as many forts as we care to, it won’t help. We don’t have the manpower in-system to protect all our assets here, not while they are half-finished.’

‘Then your suggestions, Warsmith, so that I might act upon them.’

‘That’s more like it, captain. We do not pursue, and we do not defend. We have to tempt them out, get them to attack us, and box them in.’ He nodded at his own suggestion. Lens glow glanced off the dull metallic armour plates. ‘Yes. The only way to stop something that loves to move is to give it no opportunity to move at all. Order up our orbital fighters and gunships, standard search pattern.’

‘My lord, we have less than half a grand company at our disposal. The weather is closing in. We are unlikely to find them.’

‘Finding them is not the point,’ said Xyrokles. ‘They’ll be expecting us to search. Let’s not disappoint them.’

Some six hundred metres above, five White Scars stood in guard around a rocky eminence. Four wore the insignia of clan lords, the bond-kin of a khan of the Ordu. The fifth was the Khan Ishigu of the Third Tempest. He was a warrior of high rank and renown, but at that moment he stood with his warriors as a common sentry, for he waited on the Khan of Khans, Jaghatai, primarch of the White Scars.

The primarch knelt on a boulder above them, magnoculars to his eyes. He was leaning far out over the drop, thin air and a painful, fatal tumble down sharp rocks awaiting should he fall. Ishigu Khan and his men did not fear for their gene-father. He was the lord of all Khans, a son of the Emperor. Such a slip for him was unthinkable. A man might as well expect the sky to stumble.

Runic notifiers blinked in Ishigu’s helm. He evaluated them and, finding

danger in the warning, addressed his lord.

‘My Khan,’ he said. ‘Two groups of enemy aircraft are moving in from the west and south on intersecting courses. Five lightning crows, a dozen gunships, mixed classes. They will be over our position within ten minutes.’

The Khan of Khans lowered his magnoculars.

‘They begin their search for us, Ishigu.’ He grinned back at his men. ‘They will find nothing. We leave now.’

Xyrokles’ men engaged in constant searches to no effect. In the meantime, three more sites were attacked and badly damaged. All was as the Warsmith expected, and so he was not unduly concerned.

‘I know how this Legion thinks,’ Xyrokles told his five line captains. ‘We must behave as they expect, in order to hide our intentions.’

‘Why, lord?’ asked Captain Melias, head of Xyrokles’ armoured century.

‘Because it is what Jaghatai Khan would do,’ said Xyrokles. ‘Helpfully, their primarch has put down a number of his thoughts on the nature of strategy. Misdirection is a keystone of his tenets of war.’

‘They fight dirty,’ said Captain Herakt.

‘Dishonestly,’ corrected Xyrokles.

Herakt picked up one of a number of slender pamphlets from the table. It was made of pounded grass paper, and written in hand-painted Chogorian ideograms. He held it open in his dull metal fists. His helm clicked as his suit cogitator attempted a translation.

‘Know one’s self, know one’s enemy. If you do not know your nature, it cannot be honed, but remains blunt. If you do not know your enemy’s nature, your attack will likewise be blunted…’ Herakt laughed. ‘What gnomic nonsense is this?’

‘It is irritatingly composed, but taken together there is a certain poetry to it,’ said Xyrokles.

‘He’s not exactly a plain speaker, is he?’ Herakt tossed the book back onto the table.

‘He is not. But the concepts expressed in these books are valid.’ Xyrokles tapped a small stack of the pamphlets. ‘They are a useful insight into his mind and the tactics of his Legion.’

‘You’ve been studying these texts, my lord?’ said Herakt.

‘I have. There are more forms of war than ours alone. A mastery of sieges

is of little use when your opponent scorns walls. I told you, I know this primarch.' He poked his finger into the tri-d map on the chart desk they stood around. The projection fizzed around his finger. 'Enough to know that station nine will be next.'

'That's my site,' said Captain Garazhk, looking up from a book of logistical tables suddenly.

'I am glad you are paying attention,' said Xyrokles.

'Then I shall evacuate,' said Garazhk.

'You will do no such thing,' said Xyrokles.

'Stand easy, brother captain, there's only a few of them,' said Herakt mockingly.

'Easy to say when it is not your men at risk,' said Garazhk, irritated easily by Herakt's baiting, as he always was. 'Why should we stand and die? Nobody else has had any luck against them. Warsmith, it makes no sense.'

'It makes perfect sense,' said Xyrokles.

'I protest, my lord,' said Garazhk. 'If you order me to fight, I shall, but I request reinforcements. Divided across the construction sites as we are, we have insufficient manpower at any one to stop them. We must meet them in force, and let them break themselves on the walls of our bodies. We have lost, how many?'

'Fifty-nine of seven hundred men,' said Melias.

'None of them yours,' said Captain Kyrix sourly.

'There will be no reinforcements,' said Xyrokles.

'Then… what?' said Garazhk. 'You want me to stand there and die?'

'I want you and your line company to make a show of defying them. You know they are coming, make them pay. Those are your orders.'

'We'll still be dead,' grumbled Garazhk.

'That is up to you,' said Xyrokles. His captains looked at each other. Xyrokles was exhibiting a great deal of patience, and he was not a patient man. The only time he did not snap and berate his warriors was when he had some kind of clever strategy in mind. These were usually successful, but costly in blood. 'Some of us are going to die,' that's what the captains' shared glances said.

'We cannot dig in. They will neutralise the defence laser network before it is finished. Need I remind you of Lord Perturabo's orders? We must deal with them quickly. If we allow the attack on station nine to proceed, we will

have the White Scars exactly where we need them,' said Xyrokles. 'Captain Tar-Julsk.' He addressed the only captain who had not spoken. Tar-Julsk was thoughtful, and had spent the whole edification examining the data Xyrokles presented.

'My lord Warsmith?'

'You will prepare a convoy of materials to repair the four damaged sites.'

'I thought we weren't repairing the sites?' said Phideark.

'We are not. Not yet. I only want it to look like we are, because that's what they will be expecting us to do.'

'My lord, doing what he expects us to do will lead to defeat!' protested Garazhk.

'Wrong,' said Xyrokles. 'I have not finished. If I hear more objections, I will be looking for a new seventh captain.'

Garazhk shut up.

'I see your strategy,' said Tar-Julsk. He leaned forwards. The light of the cartolith danced in his eyes.

'Explain to the others,' said Xyrokles.

'I gather the convoy here, in the safety of the canyons leading up to the peaks.' He pointed to a maze of canyons the Iron Warriors had been using as a way up the mountains. 'I will take a full complement of guards, double the amount doctrine demands, in fact. We will reveal ourselves while the enemy are attacking station nine. They will identify me as a target of opportunity and strike, even though they will be weakened, low on ammunition and fuel, because I will be too tempting to ignore. You will counter-attack. They will be pinned into place, and destroyed.'

'That is almost correct,' said Xyrokles. 'We will ambush them, but allow them the opportunity to withdraw. We will then hit them repeatedly with attacks here, here and here.' Xyrokles traced a line through the unforgiving mountainous terrain. 'They will be caught here.' He stabbed his armoured fingers down on a wide plateau. 'Our fighters will cut off their retreat. Melias will be lying in wait with his armoured century. They will be surrounded on all sides, and we shall obliterate them.'

'Risky,' said Tar-Julsk. 'Melias must get into position without being seen.'

'I can do it,' said Melias with a shrug. 'If they're engaged at station nine, they won't be looking.'

'They will withdraw,' Xyrokles gloated. 'That is their habit in the face of

unfavourable odds. They will take the bait, unwittingly run into larger forces and withdraw again. We will direct their every move, until they are trapped.'

Tar-Julsk nodded. 'A good plan.'

Garazhk was relieved. 'So I will not face a full attack for long.'

'Can we be sure they will take this route into the mountains?' asked Herakt.

'It is a steep valley, limited opportunity for our fighter craft to take them, plenty of terrain for them to lose our ground forces in. What would you do in their position?' said Tar-Julsk.

'Our armour is the key to this fight. If we get them to face Melias, our problem will cease to be,' said Xyrokles. 'You have your orders. Let us rid ourselves of this irritant.'

Ishigu swept around the defence laser construction site. There were three dozen similar stations set around the planet's equatorial mountain chain, where they could target ships arriving at Epsilon-Garmon's Mandeville point. Epsilon-Garmon was a small orange star, its system tiny and of little strategic value, but the Khan, and evidently the Iron Warriors, thought Lord Guilliman's Legion might come that way.

Weapons fire chased his brotherhood across the planet's dusty sky. Sharp bursts of Chogorian battle talk kept the swarming flights of jetbikes in formation as they swept and dived over the site. Boltgun fire from the bikes drove back the enemy, while Storm Eagles and Thunderhawks ran bombing runs. Floury clouds of rock dust burst from the ground with each missile hit. Fire flashed in the clouds. The Iron Warriors were tenacious foes. Ishigu's brotherhood would have to land to finish them off.

'Khan,' his bond-brother Hesegai voxed him. *'Their response times are getting quicker. We have enemy interceptors en route to our position.'*

Ishigu roared around in a banking curve over the battlefield. The mission was not finished, but it would have to do. 'Enemy work site is heavily damaged. Withdraw.'

The clouds of attack craft and skimmers flew apart, hurtling away from the battle in every direction. Each of the defence laser construction sites were located high up the faces of the mountains, and Ishigu sped down near-vertical slopes away from the enemy. One by one his brotherhood fell back

into flight with him.

‘Casualties,’ Ishigu demanded.

His sergeants reported their losses. Three dead for certain, one more jetbike downed, though the rider’s suit signum was still active and moving away from the battlefield.

‘Log Kin-Ha’s position. We will retrieve him at nightfall,’ he said.

They dipped into steep valleys. Enemy strike fighters blazed overhead, their auspexes unable to get a lock on the speeding assault brotherhood hidden in the canyons beneath them.

‘They do not see us. Split up into your extraction groupings and make for camp,’ Ishigu said. Quick blurts of vox chatter acknowledged his order, and he was about to respond to them when a flashing mark on his helm cartolith caught his attention. ‘Hold that last,’ he said. Data screed ran quickly down his faceplate. ‘I have new orders. A convoy attempting the ascent from the lowlands. They were waiting for us to be invested in attack before making a run for it.’

‘Who knew the Iron Warriors could be so cunning?’ said Hesegai. ‘Do we engage?’

Ishigu checked the fuel gauges of his forty-strong attack force. ‘Engage,’ he said.

Hesegai sang a snatch of hunting song. ‘I am enjoying this little war!’ he whooped.

The convoy ground slowly up the mountain pass. The core of it was fifteen heavy haulers, dragging trailers laden with newly made construction equipment to replace what the White Scars had destroyed. Sixteen Rhinos and light tanks escorted them. None of the vehicles enjoyed the terrain, and they dragged themselves metre by painful metre through the primary slot canyon. Tar-Julsk’s force was an expensive lure; the machinery had taken a great deal of effort to construct and would be lost in the battle.

The Iron Warriors had been obliged to build their own road into the mountains, but the White Scars had bombed it several times, and the going was slow. The chances were Tar-Julsk’s luring force would take heavy casualties, but he bore the risk stoically. That was the Legion way.

Tar-Julsk detected the White Scars as soon as they burst out of a side canyon three kilometres to his rear.

‘They have risen to the bait,’ he voxed. ‘Convoy haulage elements, begin your escape. Squads seven to twelve, hang back and engage.’

Engines roared so loudly in the canyon that they penetrated the armour of Tar-Julsk’s command Spartan. The smell of overheated drive plates filled the crew compartment from the haulers struggling ahead.

Seconds later, screaming jets echoed up the canyon. Gunfire sounded from the rearguard of Whirlwinds and Sicarans. A moment later the White Scars were among them, their jetbikes screaming, bolters banging. The whooshing roar of melta weaponry came next as Land Speeders followed the faster bikes. An explosion rocked Tar-Julsk’s Land Raider.

Comms chatter from his men was calm in his vox-bead.

‘Hauler six destroyed.’

‘They are fast. I cannot target them.’

‘Enemy elements regrouping for second attack run.’

Tar-Julsk’s face set. ‘Iron Within, Iron Without,’ he muttered to himself.

Ishigu flew over the convoy. The Iron Warriors behaved true to form: their tanks covering the rear, chasing the jetbikes with gunfire as they raced by, looped around and flew back, while the haulers attempted to escape forwards.

‘We have them,’ Hesegai laughed. *‘They are trapped!’*

A second hauler exploded, the tractor unit lifted up so violently it upset its trailer, spilling the crane it carried onto the rough road.

‘Squad Screaming Hawk, target the foremost hauler,’ Ishigu commanded. ‘Block the pass. Stop their escape.’

‘As you command, khan,’ Screaming Hawk’s sergeant voxed back. Scimitar jetbikes accelerated past Ishigu, protecting a Proteus-class Land Speeder at the centre of their tight grouping. Ishigu watched them jink past the fire of the Whirlwind tanks. Missiles burned past them, evaded at the last possible moment. The targeting systems could not regain locks in time, and the missiles slammed into the cliffs, bringing down noisy rockfalls onto the pass.

‘They do our job for us,’ Hesegai said.

Screaming Hawk swooped on its target, strafing the lead convoy elements with mass-reactives. But before the meltaguns of the Land Speeder could do their work, a second barrage of missiles came down from above, fired

from the canyon lip.

‘Enemy troops on the ground, coordinates–’

A direct hit turned Screaming Hawk’s sergeant into a ball of fire. A second jetbike exploded immediately after. Missiles rained down and cut up from the canyon floor, creating a crossfire that even the White Scars could not evade. Lascannon fire flickered up the canyon, and Ishigu’s augurs rang urgent alarms.

‘Enemy aircraft coming from behind,’ he voxed. ‘This is a trap. Break off attack. Accelerate forwards, punch through, and regroup.’

He depressed the accelerator on his bike, sending the Scimitar surging forwards. His men followed.

‘Fly on and out,’ he commanded. But as soon as he spoke, more aircraft burned overhead, creating a ceiling that boxed the White Scars into the canyon. He craned his neck to follow their flightpaths. They circled like eagles, content to wait for the moment to strike.

‘Up the mountain, then,’ Hesegai voxed.

‘Reading more troops ahead!’ Ishigu voxed urgently. ‘Bank left. Take canyon spur.’ He sent a datasquirt highlighting a narrow defile to his warriors’ displays. Still accelerating, they pulled up, sweeping about. Though they turned just before they came into the firing line of the men hiding up the canyon, one of his men strayed too far, and took a multi-laser volley from the position. The engine lit up with explosions, and the Space Marine fell on a tail of black smoke to his death.

‘Ride the storm, my brothers!’ Ishigu commanded, opening his throttle to full.

The canyon spur was very narrow. Rocks flashed by, some close enough to touch. The spur ran out a few kilometres ahead, breaking up into several short tributary formations that led up onto a plateau.

‘Reach the end, break by squad, gain the mountainside and escape. Designate point Cheng Shek as rendezvous.’

The defile was too narrow for the enemy fighters to follow, and too overhung for them to fire effectively from above. The Iron Warriors didn’t appear to have any skimmers to chase them with, but Ishigu was concerned nonetheless.

‘They’re herding us,’ Hesegai said.

‘They are,’ Ishigu responded. ‘It has been tried before. No one can catch

the wind.’

They raced up the defile, swerving around its sharp corners. It broadened out momentarily. A small lake, low in the dry season, blurred by. Five feeder valleys as crooked as arthritic fingers led off.

‘Split, split, split!’ Ishigu ordered.

The enemy were there too, guarding the entrances to the valleys, firing down on his men. The White Scars were exposed as they crossed the lake, and the aircraft joined their fire to that of the ground troops. Two more jetbikes went crashing down before the dwindling raiding party made it to the relative safety of the smaller canyons. These rose steeply, and Ishigu’s gravplates warbled in protest at the angle of the climb. Shadows crowded him. His shoulder pad rang, fountaining sparks as it brushed a volume in the rock. A millimetre more and he would have been torn from his saddle.

Thundering more loudly than the sky gods of Chogoris, the Scimitar burst from the canyon onto the plateau. From the other chasms, black cracks in the ground no wider than a few metres, the rest of his force shot upwards and spread out, racing for their rendezvous.

‘Enemy tanks, dead ahead!’ someone shouted, at the instant Ishigu’s helm systems clamoured.

Cresting the rise of the ridge at the end of the plateau came a full century of Iron Warrior armoured vehicles.

Xyrokles watched from the safety of his personal Land Raider.

‘Annihilate them,’ he voxed.

Few things stirred his soul as much as an armoured century opening fire together. Twenty-five tanks raked the sky with laslight and bullets. The White Scars powered through it, but such was the weight of the attack that they would all be killed before they reached safety again. Xyrokles estimated that the party represented the majority of the White Scar forces on Epsilon-Garmon II. Typical Chogorian raiding tactics, small forces sent out to cause maximum damage, hard to catch, but once caught, easily dealt with.

‘I have the measure of you!’ he said to himself. ‘Iron Within, Iron Without!’

He was still congratulating himself on the success of his plan when the Land Raider next to his exploded violently. He instinctively searched the

skies for more aerial contacts, but there were none. It was not until another tank died in a flaming ball of shrapnel that he scanned the ground.

A dozen White Scars tank hunters were racing onto the battlefield, cutting across the armoured century's advance and firing as they came. The fleeing raiding force ceased their ragged rout, and flowed together. A second skimmer force lifted off from concealed positions up the mountain and split, half attacking the line of tanks, the rest speeding off to hunt down the corralling forces Xyrokles had placed in the canyons. A final chorus of chimes alerted him to White Scar interdiction fighters powering up and dropping from orbit onto the Iron Warriors atmospheric force.

Within a few moments, it was over.

The White Scars dragged Xyrokles from his burning tank and stripped him of his damaged armour, leaving him grimy-faced and clad in his tattered body suit, kneeling in disgrace with his hands bound behind his back.

He seethed inside as the savage White Scars went over the battlefield, executing his men and reducing his vehicles to slag with fusion charges and phosphene bombs. Heat washed over him from the burning wrecks of his task force. His captors laughed with one another, jesting in their sawing, singsong barbarian's speech. A single warrior, his armour more heavily decorated with primitive markings than the rest, stood guard over him. Otherwise Xyrokles was ignored, and he ignored them in return.

A heavier tread made him look up. He found himself staring into the face of Jaghatai Khan himself.

Xyrokles fought back his unease at being in the presence of a primarch. Even now, after years fighting half of them as enemies, it was hard for him to overcome his awe of the Emperor's sons.

'Your presence explains my defeat,' said Xyrokles. He sagged in his bonds. 'White Scars staging a tank assault. Concealed troops. Not true to type at all. I never had much of a chance.'

'Did you not?' Jaghatai Khan squatted in front of the Iron Warrior. 'Look at me, Warsmith.'

Xyrokles had no choice but to obey.

'My men would have beaten you even if I were not here.'

'I disagree,' said Xyrokles.

The Khan was hiding something in his fist. He opened his hand, revealing

Xyrokles' copies of his books.

'You have studied my philosophies,' said the Khan. 'You think you understand me because you know my Legion's preference for lightning war. This is false understanding, Iron Warrior. You read the words, but did not fully comprehend. If you had, you would have anticipated my actions. All this was a simple game of opposites. You allowed yourself to be confident in the reading of my Legion, when all along my purpose was to make you fall prey to hubris. Your attempt to concentrate and misdirect my force was well chosen, but flawed from the outset, because you did not consider I could be here personally, or that my men might employ different strategies. You did not see my tanks because you did not look for them.' He smiled, a white flash in his tanned face. 'I admit, I am a little impressed. It is unusual for your kind to be flexible in battle. Unfortunate for you that, in the war of storms, I am the stronger wind. Know that failure is not a sin. You fought well.'

'Why are you telling me this?' Xyrokles asked. 'You have killed all my men. You will execute me in moments.'

The Khan shrugged. 'Maybe my words will live on in your spirit when you are dead. Think on them in your next life. May they increase your wisdom, and profit you. I give them freely.'

The Khan stood. His master-crafted power armour made barely a sound.

Xyrokles began to laugh, a chuckle that turned into full-bellied humour, and ended in a bloody cough. He spat. Something was broken inside him. 'The next life? You should have followed the Warmaster.'

'Why would I do that?' asked the Khan neutrally.

'Don't demean yourself by playing ignorant, my lord. You know exactly what I mean. What you say does not conform with the Imperial truth.'

'My father's truth is His truth. It is not *my* truth,' said the Khan. 'Every truth is a lie to someone. I am the son of the storm as much as I am the son of the Emperor. You are not the first to try to sway me, but if the thunder in my heart will not be tamed by my father, then it will not be tamed by my brother, either. I choose my own path.'

Xyrokles shook his head. 'You're on the wrong side. The Emperor lied. He used us all.'

'That is what you believe,' said the Khan. 'Rightness in a war is relative, as is truth. I choose to be loyal to the Emperor's ideal even if I do not

believe in His truth. You are a traitor to all mankind.' He smiled again. 'In the end, I won, and you have lost, that is all that matters here. I thank you for the contest of wills.' The Khan dipped his head.

'Pompous, double-talking wretch!' Xyrokles snarled. 'Why don't you go and…'

Jaghatai Khan moved too quickly for the Warsmith to see. Xyrokles felt a firm grip on his head, a sharp twist, something part in his neck, and life was done with him.

The Khan set Xyrokles' body down gently.

'Rouse your astropaths. Summon the fleet here,' he said to Ishigu. 'You did well, but we have a little work left to do, and it must be done quickly. I wish to neutralise more such places and clear the way for Guilliman before we head back deeper into the cluster. Sanguinius needs us. The Warmaster has mustered many more Titan Legions at Beta-Garmon than we suspected.'

Ishigu bowed. 'What of this one, my Khan?'

Jaghatai stared down at Xyrokles' corpse for a moment.

'Bury him with respect. He fought well, and with finesse.' He turned his gaze skywards, already calculating where his attention should fall next. 'In this war, an enemy with finesse is no small thing.'

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BETTER ANGELS

Ian St. Martin

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I do not know why I have been chosen, or how, only that I am.

My footsteps are quiet against the sweeping mosaic that spans the floor of the passageway. I walked slower then, in those early days of ascension, when each new-drawn breath brought new insights of my changing flesh. It was well enough that way, for it granted me the time to drink in the magnificence that surrounded me.

The walls are lined with masterworks in oil, fresco and gold, every piece flowing perfectly into the next and each one more incredible than the last. The vision, the detail of them, is enough to send gooseflesh rising over my scar-laden skin. Any single one of these pieces would take pride of place anywhere on any world, with the exception of Terra.

This continues on into the next corridor, with wondrous art filling every surface: wall, floor and ceiling above. It would be easy for me to forget where I was, were it not for the ever-present thrum of the *Red Tear*'s heart.

At last my destination comes into view. A pair of high double doors lie ahead, intricately carved with a stunning scene of angelic beauty in pearl, ruby and gold. Two of the Legion's Terminator elite stand guard before it, still as statues until my approach sends their fibre-bundle musculatures snarling into life.

No word of challenge is spoken, but the hall rings with the clash of swords brought together to bar my path. I lower the cowl of my simple crimson aspirant's robes, revealing to them a face still shedding the last vestiges of a

past humanity. The Terminators scrutinise me for a moment, and my now-enhanced hearing detects the minute clicks as they speak with the lone occupant of the chamber beyond the doors.

With a sharp rasp of steel, the Terminators lower their blades, and part before me as the doors slowly open.

For a few long moments, I stand upon the threshold, simply content to stare at what lies in front of me. I had expected a sprawling chamber of high, painted ceilings and prized works of incomparable beauty sitting upon plinths or gently hanging within the cool hum of stasis fields. What I find is a plain, simple studio, little different than what one might find in any city of any world within the expanding Imperium of Man. But that isn't what roots me in place.

Standing in the centre of the studio is the source of the transcendent blood that flows through my veins. Such a being belongs in a gallery surrounded by other masterpieces, yet even then he would effortlessly reduce them all to pale imitation. His wings stir a fraction, their pinions pale as pure snow, as he looks at me with a noble countenance that demands loyalty, or even worship.

I have to physically resist the overwhelming urge to sink to my knees in the primarch's presence, to hold back tears at the mere sight of him.

The Angel.

'Hello, my son,' says Sanguinius. 'I have interest in seeing you work.'

It is only then that I notice the equipment filling the studio. There are tools and benches, a furnace and kiln, and a sweep of different sands and crushed minerals that, when combined, could render wonders.

Like all other neophytes, I had been exposed to the myriad avenues of artistic endeavour as part of my Legion training. I had composed sonnets and symphonies, painted portraits and scenes from Baal's history, and moulded clay and stone into heroes of the past. But like all Blood Angels, one art form called out to me with insistent strength, and for me that art form was glass.

In truth, the medium had likely ingrained itself upon me much earlier. The memories I have of life before the Legion fade with each passing day, swiftly disintegrating, but there are sometimes fragments. Here an image, there an untethered emotion.

I remember the day my tribe died, raided and butchered by the mutated

hordes that terrorised Baal and her moons in the age before the primarch's arrival. I remember the flames staining the ground, turning the sand to filthy, jagged glass. It was with a sliver of that glass that I survived, fighting to escape into the endless dunes of the sour, rad-poisoned wastes, before my eventual masters discovered me.

'You have the materials you need?' asks Sanguinius, jarring me from my thoughts.

'Yes, lord,' I nod quickly. 'This is more than adequate.'

'Go, then,' Sanguinius gestures to the furnace and tools. 'Be about your work. Act as though I am not here.'

'That is impossible, sire.'

The primarch smiles softly.

I proceed to the furnace, selecting a combination of sand and ground glass fragments and pouring them inside. The contents within quickly grow molten in the intense heat, forming a pool of searing liquid at the base.

I draw in a breath and take up a blowing iron, a hollow tube just longer than I am tall. I drive the iron into the furnace, rolling and turning it in my hands to gather up a portion of the molten glass around it. The material is the consistency of honey, and I quickly set about shaping and forming it, reapplying heat from a hand flamer to keep it pliable before it grows too cold.

After hours of heating and cooling, cutting and shaping, and finally annealing within a ceramic kiln, my work is complete. When it is cold enough to remove, I pull the piece out, placing it on a plinth before my primarch, who has watched its creation in silence. I step back, head bowed, tugging off the insulated protective gloves that are rapidly growing unnecessary for me to use.

Sanguinius looks down, and sees his own visage reflected back at him. I have sculpted an exact likeness of the primarch's face. I worked with painstaking detail, stealing glances at the Angel to ensure that the resemblance is uncanny, apart from the colour. The glass shines a brilliant forest green, as though it is carved emerald.

'The colour,' says Sanguinius, letting the question hang.

'Soil from Baal,' I answer. The iron-rich earth of the Legion home world, a famously deep crimson, transformed into green when applied onto the molten glass.

‘Your coming brought rebirth to Baal,’ I elaborate. ‘The unification of the tribes, peace, the Emperor, it was all a transformation and spring of new life for us, and the hope to return our world to what it once was.’

Sanguinius turns the sculpture over in his hands, tracing the features with his fingertips. ‘This demonstrates skill, passion, even vision. Yet it fails in the most critical of ways.’

Fails. The word from my gene-sire’s lips makes me go cold in an instant, like a knife blow to my spine. ‘I do not understand, lord.’

‘You failed,’ continues the primarch, ‘the moment you created something for *me*, rather than something from within yourself. You sought to flatter, rather than inspire. The artist must create his works as though he would be the only soul to behold them, shards of his very self rendered into being. Otherwise he is simply an artisan, a merchant selling wares for coin at a market.’

I feel my heart sink, and my hands tingle. It is a sensation not unlike when I took my first life, in the trials of ascension. The sense that I have crossed a threshold that I can never return from, but this time in failure.

‘For your next piece,’ says Sanguinius, setting the sculpture back down on the plinth and stepping away from it, immediately forgotten, ‘I expect to see *you*, rather than myself.’

I look up. ‘My next piece, sire?’

‘Yes, Jehoel,’ the primarch smiles. ‘Now, start again.’

With the years come change – to the Imperium, the Legion and the Blood Angels who fill its ranks. The constant wars of the Great Crusade spread the Emperor’s dominion wider across the galaxy, won at the edge of the Legions’ blades. New scars mark the golden hull of the *Red Tear*, and the sons who walk her passages.

I myself carry my share of those scars, the collection of ragged marks that crisscross my post-human physique earned in battle overtaking those made by the Apothecary’s knife. War is my purpose, the reason my hearts beat and my lungs draw breath. But by my father’s design, it is not my only purpose.

The studio is a welcome refuge for me, a sanctum to refocus my mind from weapons drill and training in the art of destruction, to turn my thoughts to different endeavours. As my battle company continues to enact

tireless compliance upon world after world, star system after star system, I have not been able to sculpt in many weeks, and I relish the opportunity to feel the heat of the furnace upon my face once more.

But it does not take long for my sanctum's tranquillity to vanish.

I spit as I pull the finished piece from the kiln, disgusted with the misshapen sculpture that had been annealing in its intense heat. My initial gather had been poor, an unequal collection of material that formed the core of the work. The angles I have wrought are clumsy, the cuts and pulls of the molten glass with my pincers awkward and inelegant. My proportions are lopsided. Looking upon the piece, it resembles the work of an amateur, a child even, rather than that of a Legion warrior who has spent years perfecting his craft.

With a snarl of rage I dash the sculpture to the ground, shattering it into a heap of jagged glass shards that scatter over the deck. Breath slashes from my nose, and between my teeth. My fists ball and unclench, one callused and dark with soot from the furnace, the other a clicking simulacrum of dark iron.

'What is it, my son?'

I start, so rapt in my anger that I had not even noticed the change that the air takes in the primarch's presence, the extrasensory radiance that beams from him wherever he goes. It is normally a boon to lift one with inspiration, but standing here, with my destroyed work spread around me, I feel only guilt.

'It is my hand, father,' I reply, ashamed by my lapse in discipline. 'Ever since we completed the scouring of the Adryantis, since I lost my arm and this machine took its place, I can no longer shape the glass.' I hold up the augmetic, the metal fingers whirring as I flex them. 'It is as though the touch has fled from me.'

The primarch does not answer me right away. Instead, he walks a slow circuit around the studio, his great wings stirring in soft rhythm with his breathing. He stops briefly at each piece that I have created, favouring every sculpture, vessel and figure with a moment's attention.

'Tell me,' Sanguinius says finally, 'how do you define art, Jehoel? What does the word mean to you?'

I consider for a moment before answering. 'Art is the attempt to define those aspects of our minds and hearts which resist definition,' I say. 'It is a

manifestation of emotion.’

‘I did not ask for what a text would say,’ the primarch laughs softly. ‘I asked what it meant to you, my son.’

I look to my gene-sire.

‘We gave much to you,’ Sanguinius continues, ‘as we did to all those who have ascended to the ranks of my Legion, but there is also much that we take. The cost paid in exchange for becoming one of the Adeptus Astartes is high, and so many of those who walk beneath the banners of my brothers cast aside the ties to their birth, some with relish, even. But not all vestiges of what we once were must be sacrificed.’

He stops at a sculpture I created six years ago, one of the more abstract works that came in the dying moments of a battle won against the horrid greenskin xenos breed.

‘There are endeavours,’ says Sanguinius, ‘that can bind you to the race you once belonged to, that remind you of your purpose and the beauty of what we protect. That is why each brother of the Ninth is to practise an art of their own choosing. For as much as we are a force of destruction, we must never forget that we also have the ability to create.’

Sanguinius stops beside my basins of materials, gathering up a measure of fine sand and letting it slip slowly through his fingers. ‘One day, our crusade will end. This entire galaxy shall be my father’s realm, and there will come a time where there is no more cause for destruction, no need to shed blood. What will the Legions do then, Jehoel? What will become of us?’

I cannot find an answer, because in truth I have never considered such a future for myself. My life within the battle company has taught me that the foundations of the new Imperium are to be built with the lives of the Legiones Astartes, the stones of its grand edifice joined with our freely given blood. It is a glorious end, and it is the only one that had ever entered my mind as a possibility.

‘Will we be cast aside?’ Sanguinius goes on, repeating his circuit of the studio. ‘Regarded as nothing more than the relics of a more barbarous age, a necessary evil wielded as the means to a greater end? Or can we be more than that? Roboute has moulded his sons into statesmen, while Magnus the Red has raised a Legion of thinkers, philosophers and healers. Through art, by capturing and distilling what is wondrous in our universe and creating

works that connect us with it and enhance its beauty, my Blood Angels will prove to my father that we are more than just killing machines. That there can be a place for us once His conquests are won. But to do so, it requires a triumph of the spirit.'

'The spirit?' I ask. While it was true that the Legion had carried over some vestiges of the mysticism from Baal, we had always followed our primarch in his adherence to the Emperor's Imperial Truth. 'You believe there is such a thing?'

Sanguinius hesitates. 'I believe my father,' he says finally. 'Though I also trust what I have seen within my own mind.'

There is more to it than what he has said, but before I can press his meaning further, he points to my new arm.

'You are not the first to face challenges that you must overcome to pursue your craft, my son. And you will surely not be the last. Across our Legion, my sons have endured horrific injury in service to my father. And yet, each of them still takes up the brush, the quill, the lathe. Why, even Venerable-Exemplar Jophial still works tirelessly at his marble from within his sarcophagus.'

My strongest image of Jophial is of him tearing down city gates with a siege hammer. 'That is so, my lord?'

Sanguinius grins. 'Try and stop him. Your touch, as you regard it, comes no more from your flesh than it does his. It is within you, Jehoel, and all it requires to usher forth is the belief that it is there.'

I dip my head, duly chastened, but grateful for his words.

'And so,' says Sanguinius. 'Do you still believe that art comes from the hands?'

'No, father.'

'Good. Now take up your tools, and start again.'

I walk the corridors of the *Covenant of Baal*, the Legion's new flagship announcing with every clanging step, every sound and smell, that it has become a monument to all that we have lost.

There is little beauty to behold here. The walls are bare plasteel and ribbed adamantium, the brutal function of Imperial shipcraft laid bare without thought for aesthetic. At a regular interval there stands a sigil or monument, or a fresco that adorns the ceiling of a thoroughfare junction, but their

relative scarcity seems to only amplify the cold grey of the ship's metal bones. I find the same reflected in my battle brothers. The past battle, and the revelations it brought forth, has stolen beauty from us.

We are a brotherhood lost, adrift in the churning tides of a warp we now know to be conscious in its malevolent intent for us. The concept of *betrayal* had never dwelt within our thoughts. Worlds that resisted compliance were merely ignorant, rather than treacherous. Yet now the word hangs over each of our heads, like a revenant that never leaves us. The solid ground we once felt underfoot now churns beneath us like quicksand. The things we have seen, new realities we had trusted could not exist, have changed those of us who survived.

I go now to the studio I have assembled since I came aboard. With so much cast to the wind, we each cling to what we can from that time now lost to us, only weeks past but gone forever. We strive to recover beauty, when all that we can see is hell.

The tools I have now are simpler, the furnace smaller than the one I had grown used to, but they function, and that is all I require of them. I allow my mind to drift as I work, learning to draw my creativity from what is unconscious within me. The heat and sounds of the glass hardening as I roll and smooth it are soft in my ears in this trance-like state, as the piece takes shape.

Sanguinius arrives to watch my work as he used to, though this is the first time aboard the *Covenant*. He walks differently now, even though his legs have long since healed. Just as with his sons, not all the scars my father bears can be seen. Some are etched deep within his mind, only hinted at in the haunted look that has never left his eyes since Signus Prime.

I withdraw the work from the furnace, my hands gently turning the rod by instinct. Setting it into a bracket I continue to turn it while I select a battered tin from my materials. I open it, unwilling to breathe in its contents as I raise it up. Like dark snow I sift the ash down, the motes of storm grey merging with the cooling glass to drive the purity of crystal away.

'Show me what you have seen,' says the primarch, coming to a halt by my side. 'What have you made?'

I step back, allowing him to see my work and for the first time consciously looking upon it myself. It is a creature, a sort of impossible mingling of serpent and skinless dog, rising up from the centre of a wilting bloom and

holding a bleeding heart in its black teeth. I study the precise intricacy that my hands had worked, etching in the minute shapes that covered its mottled hide, recognising the burning runes that visit me on each rare occasion where I have sought sleep.

'No!'

I blink and the blowing rod is gone from my hands. Sanguinius thrusts it back into the furnace like a spear, still clutching the length of hollow iron to smash the piece to ruin against its scorched insides. It makes a sound like hollow bells which rings around the cramped room, seeming to me to echo longer than it should. I watch as the last shards fall away from the metal, quickly losing shape before they disappear into the slick pool of molten sand.

'You were to take nothing from that place,' the Angel growls as he rounds on me. I have seen my father's wrath many times, at the height of battle, yet it has never felt this close. It has never been focused at me. *'Nothing.'*

'We have all taken something from there with us, father,' I reply. 'Whether by our own choice or not.'

Sanguinius drops the blowing rod to the bare deck with a clang, nearly staggering back from me. Both of us stand there in silence, the moment dragging on an indeterminate length before I speak again.

'When we conquered civilisations and put whole worlds to the sword I sought out those ruins, those glimpses of tragic beauty, to place into here.' I point to the furnace. 'The idea that I was creating, within the grander creation of the Emperor's dream. But what do we have now? What do we do when all is ash and cold blood?'

The primarch does not answer, keeping his silence as he listens to me.

'You ask me to show you what I see, to search out the spark that unites us and will usher in peace for all mankind. But now,' I grind the heels of my hands into my temples, 'whenever I close my eyes, all that greets me is monstrosity. I hear their ragged voices in my ear, things we would not countenance to exist, that we trusted were myth and falsehood, and yet they live, and breathe, and confront us. You ask that I look inside myself, yet now all I see there is madness, twisting, swelling like a cancer that threatens to spill over into us. I see what my brethren did on Signus, what *I* did, and how easily we shed loose from our sanity. I no longer see the spark, father, only its annihilation.'

My body moves without my mind to guide it. I scatter the basins of material with a sweep of my arm, casting ground minerals and sand onto the deck. The furnace groans as I drag it to the ground with the booming crash of a cannon shot. Molten glass oozes from it like searing blood, hot as my own feels as it thunders through my hearts.

‘Did He know?’ I ask when I have recovered my breath. ‘The warp, and the Sons. The Warmaster’s rebellion.’ My voice goes quiet as I turn to look my father in the eye. ‘Why didn’t He tell us?’

‘I do not know, my son,’ the primarch answers. I see that the mention of the Warmaster harms him as clearly as any blade could, and I feel that pain reflected within my own heart. ‘Perhaps He sought to protect us, to find some way to deliver us from such darkness before it sprang forth to corrupt us and our kin.’

The Angel steps forwards, a gentle hand pulling me back from the spreading liquid glass. His grip lingers upon my shoulder, and he looks down at me with that noble countenance, still so effortless in winning my undying devotion.

‘Whatever the reason He had for secrecy, it no longer matters,’ he says with a strength I have not heard in what feels like an eternity. ‘The path before us is clear. Mankind faces an enemy unlike any we have ever known, but no shadow exists without the light that shines to dispel it. We will stand against whatever dwells within the Sea of Souls, and whoever it has turned to its whims, and we shall destroy them.’

New resolve flows with every word, radiating out from my gene-sire. For a moment, the Angel looks like the primarch that I once knew, as though he has cast off the dark ghosts of Signus.

‘Now we know the consequence that awaits us all, should we fail. As never before, we know the importance of our arts of creation and destruction, one a symbol of all that is beautiful and true that must be defended to our final breath with the other. Now, more than ever, we must summon our strength, and all of us shall start again.’

The Throneworld draws near. And with it the Siege, and Horus. After Ultramar, and the second Imperium we have all sworn to deny, a grim resolve exists amongst my brothers as our fleet cuts itself loose from the Ruinstorm. There is a sense of the irrevocable confrontation that awaits us,

as we make ready to repay the treachery of those we once knew as kin.

For all his follies, the Ninth owes a debt to Guilliman, for the shipyards and skilful labour that have restored the *Red Tear* to its rightful place as crown jewel in our Legion's fleet. Without her, we may never have escaped the Ruinstorm, and reached the cradle of our species in time to stand beside the Emperor in defence of humanity's future.

It is still strange, walking her halls. So much was lost when the *Tear* fell onto Signus, the destruction or desecration of priceless works beyond counting. We threw ourselves into the effort of winning her back to us, of driving out every last trace of the warp's taint from the flagship. Yet the traces of it remained, insistent against our efforts of annihilation.

I did my part, working in squads to comb every metre of the ship to purify her, burning out any corruption we found. And when that work was done, I turned from my talents for destruction, and worked to restore the *Tear* through creation.

Sanguinius is already there when I arrive, walking his regular orbit around a collection that now spans more than five decades, from the golden days of the Great Crusade through the darkness of Horus' rebellion, and now to the final days as Terra grows within sight. He watches me as I prepare and then set about my work, glancing at me in between plinths as I labour before the furnace. He is not yet encased within his suit of brilliant artificer armour, becoming the very manifestation of man's mythical angel of death. But the time for that draws nearer with every beat of our hearts.

The piece reaches a stage where it must anneal for a time. As I close the kiln, sealing it away, I have nothing left to distract me.

'Why me, father?'

I had not meant to ask, yet the words were spoken all the same. It is the question I have carried since my first day in this studio under the furnace heat, and every day after. Perhaps it is the sense of looming change hanging over me, of the great atrocity that lies ahead on Terra. The foreboding sense that if I do not ask now, I may never have the chance.

'What?' asks the primarch, stepping forward from among the plinths where he has been watching me work.

I realise, then, that the reason does not matter. But I am committed now. I have asked my father at last.

'Why me? Of all your Legion, why spend your attention here, through all

these years? Surely there are many greater warriors, more skilful artists, better Angels than I.’

Sanguinius looks at me, his eyes telling me that he has been expecting this.

‘Because you are the Blood Angels, Jehoel. I have watched you across these many years, the path you have walked, and as it has wound, so has that of my Legion. You rise, you triumph, you fall and grow stronger from it. Of the Legion, few embody its strengths, its follies and its dreams like you. Because, more than almost any other of my sons, I see myself in you.’

I am, as I so often am in his presence, unable to summon the words to speak. What could I possibly say in answer to such a thing? To have the primogenitor think of me in such esteem, it is beyond my ability to fathom.

‘Now, let us see what you have made.’

‘It is unfinished,’ I hesitate, looking to the kiln. ‘There is still much to do, details that have not been completed yet.’

‘Show me,’ he repeats, beckoning me over. I remove the piece from where it has been annealing, and after it has cooled enough to touch, I pass it to him.

It is Terra, but not the one that awaits us. Though none, perhaps save the Emperor, know the exact truth, I took the licence available to me and created my vision of the Terra that once was, before man turned his eyes upwards and made his first, tentative steps into the stars. It was a sphere of deep, boundless blue, indicative of the great oceans I read had once covered nearly all of her surface. Then the continents, irregular shapes of green and gold, with raised bands of the great mountains where the Emperor would one day build His palace.

Sanguinius rotates the globe in his hands, drinking in every detail. ‘If only you could see this now, on the first day you worked under my eye.’ The primarch smiles. ‘The progress you have made, Jehoel.’

‘But father,’ I shake my head, seeing only the mistakes I have made. ‘After all these decades, no matter my skill, the flaws still remain. I had hoped that with this, before we reached Terra, that my work might achieve perfection.’

‘Art is not meant to be perfect,’ says Sanguinius softly. ‘It never was. The very pursuit denies our humanity, the promise to evolve and grow with each new day. Some believed perfection was within our grasp, that such a thing could be achieved, and look upon the path that it has taken them.’

‘Without perfection,’ I realise, ‘there is no limit to what we might

accomplish, so that our future is always ours to control.’

‘You understand.’ Sanguinius places the globe back within the kiln.

‘When this is over,’ I say, setting down my tools. ‘When the Siege is won and Horus is defeated, will we start again?’

‘No.’

The word stops me cold. I turn to look at the Angel as he stands in the doorway leading out of the studio. I am uncertain of what he means, but the conviction in his voice is ironclad.

‘No, this time you will learn to make do with what you have,’ says Sanguinius, his voice equal in warmth and in sorrow. ‘Perhaps in the end, my son, it is an unfinished work that is the most beautiful of all.’

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THE CONQUEROR'S TRUTH

Gav Thorpe

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I had hoped to see a new civilisation being forged from the raw firmament. The name of the galaxy-wide endeavour – the Great Crusade – conjured images of victorious parades and the symbols of the Emperor being erected over compliant worlds. All I had witnessed was grey blocks being piled atop each other while tax collectors counted them. As a remembrancer I had been chosen to document these events for the future knowledge of humanity. It seemed such an awe-inspiring task, possessed of the subtle but magnificent vision one would expect of the Emperor of Mankind. It was not enough that the immense Empire of Earth be rebuilt; its reconstruction had to be seen by every generation hereafter that benefited from its existence, lest they forget the toil required to grow their paradise.

But then the Emperor had not really been thinking about the 382nd Expeditionary Fleet. One of countless support echelon task forces that followed in the wake of the Legions and Imperial Army, the 382nd was a resettlement mission, comprising tens of thousands of civilians overseen by Terran bureaucrats, and guarded by a few warships and a regiment of the Imperial Army. In the two years since leaving Terra I had ample opportunity to record fields being ploughed for the first time, and foundation stones being lowered by future civic dignitaries, as well as no shortage of tedious speeches by newly embedded Imperial commanders.

When the ship, imaginatively titled *Starhauler XXVI*, readied for translation to the Vestogorn system I retired to my dormitory as was usual. I

was not keen on warp translation, and it seemed that jumping out of the warp was more testing to the body and mind than entering it, though numerous others had assured me of the fallacy of that notion. So I took to bed to distract myself from imminent translation, reviewing a few hours of pict-feed footage I had recorded of the lower deck servitors securing the massive grain transports that had been loaded at Eldgharad Station – a tiresome task I had been postponing for this very reason.

The lurch from unreality to reality started in the depths of my gut and quickly spread up the spine. I felt the pricks of a thousand invisible pins in the base of my skull and tasted iron on the tongue. Even lying down I felt a surge of vertigo and rolled to the side, expecting to vomit. As ever, the actual physical act never transpired, and I was left groaning and retching for several seconds.

I lay on my back with eyes closed for several minutes, trying not to imagine the room whirling around out of sight. It was a product of the imagination, nothing more, but I couldn't persuade a rebellious stomach to see things that way.

A siren sounded, long and plaintive, the first time I had ever heard it. I sat up, bringing on a fresh wave of nausea, heart racing at the thought of what the alarm might signify. It sounded again, three short bursts this time. The chime of the personal address panel on the wall next to the bunk was a further surprise, another break from a routine established over thirteen prior in-system jumps. It was Lieutenant Khagashu, the ship's commander.

'*Remembrancer Ares.*' I always smiled at the formality of his address. '*I suggest you may wish to join me at the upper viewing deck.*'

The link cut before I could reply, somewhat frustratingly. I was a passenger, not crew, so had no means to use the communicator to reach the bridge. Without anything further to explain the situation, I was left with only the option of getting up and venturing to the upper viewing deck.

On the way up the fifteen levels, I regained my equilibrium a little. I asked a few ratings and other crew that I passed what was happening. Most ignored the inquiries but one, cornered in a conveyor for three decks, furnished me with a brief response.

'It's a proximity warning,' the petty officer told me, her smile more forced than comforting. 'Not a battle alert or anything like that. Just some other ships in the system.'

‘That’s not usual, is it?’ I asked, but the conveyor doors opened and she continued on her way without further answer.

The lieutenant was waiting beside the immense armourglass window of the upper viewing deck. He had a couple of young ensigns with him, carrying data-slates. He seemed agitated, shoulders a little hunched, fingers clasped tightly together in the small of his back. Small signs, but ones I saw immediately. The officers had stopped playing me at cards straight after they’d learned about my gift for interpreting emotion.

Khagashu turned, trying to relax, and brought his heels together, as though coming to attention before a superior.

‘Remembrancer Ares–’

‘Call me Ennylin,’ I said, as always when he was so formal.

‘–we have translated into an occupied system.’ He examined me for a moment, brow creasing. ‘You have not brought your pict-feed?’

I wanted to shrivel up at the implication of my oversight. Some remembrancer, forgetting to bring her recording equipment.

‘Still groggy from translation,’ I muttered.

‘You shall want to be catching this, I expect,’ said the lieutenant.

I looked at the window but all I could see was the local star – slightly fuzzy blue compared to our own sun – and the starfield beyond.

‘We cannot see anything yet,’ said the lieutenant.

‘Why–’

‘I like to come up here after translation, to feel part of the real universe again,’ Khagashu told me. He took one of the data-slates and showed me the screen, on which was a graphic representation of a world, and orbiting above it were the courses of several dozen spacecraft.

‘Another settlement fleet?’ I wasn’t sure what I was being shown. ‘Has there been some kind of mistake?’

‘These are Legiones Astartes vessels, Remembrancer Ares,’ he said, touching a finger to the pad. An icon appeared next to each moving rune, identifying its allegiance.

A skull with bat-like wings to either side. My heart managed to both freeze and thrash simultaneously, blood rushing to my head while a chill prickled across my skin.

‘The Night Lords…’

When the shuttle doors to the flight bay drew back, I wasn't sure what to expect. Stories of the Night Lords were scarce, leaving much detail to be desired but always possessed of a common theme. They were ruthless, if one was being generous. Amongst the remembrancers there was a rumour that the Night Lords Legion delighted in torture, that they took pride in the terror their attacks sowed.

And, if the fleeting exchanges with others at waystations and orbital platforms was any guide, the Night Lords' reputation had worsened since the return of their primarch.

So I was expecting some visual sign of this character when I stepped aboard the *Nightfall*, flagship of the Eighth Legion and throne-craft of the darkly-regarded Konrad Curze.

Instead I was struck by the mundanity of the scene. As well as the functional shuttle that had brought me across from the hauler, the bay was home to two gunships, their armoured hulls coloured in the midnight blue of the Legion. Various machines and banks of monitoring equipment lined one wall. I continued to survey my surroundings. One revolution took in the inner doors, the windows of a command cabin and its sole occupant – a bored-looking orderly in plain white robes – and then the great doors that had sealed across the bay.

The hangar was otherwise empty. Certainly devoid of welcome, as much as it was free from grotesque trophies and intimidating decor.

'I'm getting the command to leave,' the shuttle pilot called from inside the craft. 'Are you staying?'

'Of course,' I told him. 'I asked to join the fleet, to see the attack.'

'You asked to come to the *Nightfall*?' I couldn't see the pilot's face, but his voice betrayed some shock. 'You want to be here?'

'Well, I didn't think I'd get invited to the flagship itself, no…' It had come as a shock, and I had spent half an hour in my quarters hyperventilating at the thought, but I decided not to share that information. 'I suppose this is where the other remembrancers are stationed. After all, this is where the Great Crusade is really happening!'

I took a few steps further from the docking ramp so that he could close the shuttle gangway. With a hiss the craft sealed itself.

At the same moment the clank of a heavy lock drew attention to the inner doors. One swung inwards, revealing a chamber beyond the flight deck. The

whine of the shuttle jets increased and I realised that the main bay doors couldn’t open until I had left, unless I wanted to be blown out into the uncaring void.

I hurried through the other door, almost running into the giant figure that stood within. I am considered short by most Terrans, and my head came up to the bottom of his chest-plate. It was blazoned with a winged skull, pale silver against the midnight blue. He wore no helm, his face seemingly proportioned oddly by my perspective, as a child views an adult, all chin with eyes close to the scalp.

It wasn’t simply height that made him imposing, nor the breadth of his chest and shoulders – vaster than any person I had met. His armour buzzed with energy and there was a scent of machine and anger and death about him. My uncle had kept horses on Terra and I remembered being trapped in the stable with them once when I was small, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the beasts and the smell of sweat and manure. It was almost the same feeling, even though I was in a chamber several metres high and quite broad.

The door clanging shut behind me caused me to jump.

‘Come with me,’ he said, turning away. His Nostraman accent caused the words to sound clipped, emphasising that it was a command, not a request.

The sound of his armour was a constant whine in my ears, the thud of boots on the metal deck a steady drumbeat.

I followed without comment or question, cowed by his presence and his attitude. I jogged to maintain pace, though could not escape the feeling that he was checking his stride for my benefit. We travelled by conveyor, heading up, and then a short distance along another deck until I came before double doors of black wood, decorated in gold with the lightning strikes of Terra behind the winged skull of the Night Lords.

A state room of sorts.

‘In here,’ my guide said curtly, gauntleted finger jabbing a runepad set into the wall. He remained just long enough to usher me into the interior before turning away, the door sighing closed at his departure.

My eye was first drawn to an immense window – a row of several windows in fact, together easily fifty metres broad – and the arc of a planet just in view below the *Nightfall*. Flickers of light played over the greenish-blue atmosphere and I saw the flash of lance-light across the void. Trails of

torpedoes descended towards the surface, the bright moments of light illuminating the snarling prows of more warships. Plasma plumes from engines pushing these vessels through their manoeuvres gleamed azure against the dark canopy of space.

My breath came in gasps, my heart trembling at the thought – I was witnessing an actual battle.

'Imagine being even closer.'

The voice was soft, but startled me all the same. I turned my head towards its source and was amazed to see a man standing at the far end of the window, taller even than the Space Marine that had escorted me. He was clad in ornate war-plate, though it was hard to see as the lumens had been dimmed and most of the light came from the reflected starlight of the planet through the windows.

His face was gaunt and pale, eyes fixed upon me like a predator. Thin lips smiled even as that gaze dissected me with a swift glance.

Konrad Curze.

He stepped towards me, purposeful but not aggressive. While the Space Marine had been a seething mass of contained aggression, there was a detachment about Curze. He directed my gaze to the view with a finger and stood behind me, one hand resting lightly on the back of my neck. There was no movement, no caressing, and I felt oddly safe with the weight of that armoured glove pressing against the curls of my hair.

'This is what you wanted to see.' His voice was quiet. I saw his reflection against the darkness of space, the voids of his eyes intent upon the arc of world below us.

I nodded, not daring to speak.

'Why did you want to see me?'

'I…' I thought to step away but his grip tightened ever so slightly, reacting to the intent before it had even crystallised in my mind. I cleared my throat, mouth dry. 'I told the lieutenant I wanted a combat attachment. I never thought…'

'I did not say that you asked to be here, I said that you *wanted* to be.' Curze released his hold and stepped back. My breath exited in a gasp of relief, though I hadn't realised I had been holding it in. 'You crave this, Ennylin.'

I turned as he backed away a few steps. The primarch gestured towards the

pict-feed in my hand.

‘You have a gift, I expect. A way of capturing moments that few others do?’

‘I see…’ It was hard to explain how my attention was drawn to the innermost thoughts shown in the face and movements of a person. I felt them as much as I saw them. As I had with Khagashu and the Night Lord, now I did so with Curze. ‘Yes, I have a very good eye. I reveal the truth with my footage.’

‘The truth?’ He seemed offended at first but then his smile returned, though there was no warmth in his eyes to match the twist of his lips. ‘The truth is a dangerous thing, Ennylin. Do want to see the Imperial Truth?’

‘Yes, I’ve wanted to see the real crusade ever since I was selected for the remembrancer corps.’

He nodded. A few seconds later the door hissed open again and another Space Marine entered. His face was lean, not without handsome elements, though two scars marked the left side, across brow and cheek, giving the impression of a permanent sneer. I then realised that the lower scar had little to do with his arrogant demeanour – the Night Lord’s lip was curled with scorn, his eyes assessing me. While I had felt the predatory nature of Curze, that had been a cold, practical sense. From this one I noted the hallmarks of unalloyed malice. He was not just a killer, but one that took pleasure in what he did.

‘This is my equerry, Captain Jago Sevatarion,’ said Curze. ‘He will give you what you want.’

I approached the Space Marine, determined not to be daunted by his presence though his calculating gaze made my blood run cold.

‘Thank you, captain,’ I managed to muster before my voice abandoned me.

‘Call me Sevatar,’ he said, eyes flashing with genuine amusement. ‘Let us see if we can find you some war to remember for the Emperor.’

‘Hold on.’

Sevatar’s instruction was not necessary – in fact I think he delighted in the irony of issuing it, given that my hands were clamped so tightly to my restraints that I had lost feeling in my fingertips. The gunship bucked beneath us, buffeted by turbulence and seemingly erratic thrusts of the plasma jets which I assumed were necessary to keep us on some kind of

course.

Sevatar stood next to me, armour whining constantly as it adjusted to his ever-changing stance, compensating for the plunging, yawing motion of the Thunderhawk.

‘How. Can. You. Stand. Up?’ It was hard to talk with my teeth gritted so hard.

Sevatar grinned, turning his lower scar into a vicious curl.

‘This is nothing, remembrancer. We’re travelling more slowly for your benefit.’ He slapped a gauntleted hand on the thick restraint. ‘If this was a combat drop your spine would have snapped in two, even with these to hold you.’

Some kind of landing thrusters kicked into life, arresting our descent suddenly. Blood rushed from my head and I felt myself pushed into the bench, despite the support of the restraints. Spots danced across my vision and I felt dizzy.

It lasted a few seconds, I suppose, though it felt longer. I heard the crunch of landing gear on the ground, and we settled hard, jolting me back against the side of the fuselage. Drop harnesses creaked up as they released the squad of Night Lords that had accompanied us. Sevatar pushed on his helm and twisted it with a hiss of closing seals. It was fashioned with a fanged skull over the faceplate, most disconcerting to have looking down at me, two bat-like wings splaying in a crest to imitate the Legion’s badge. From above the bench he drew a long-hafted weapon, its chain-toothed end slightly curved, the teeth themselves glinting in the ruddy light of the gunship’s interior. A weapon as cruel as its bearer.

‘Is it going to be dangerous?’ I asked as he banged a fist against my harness release. The padded bars lifted upwards and the belt seemed to slither back over my waist like a serpent. I stood up, using a support beam to steady myself as I crouched and twisted to pull my pict-feed from the locker underneath.

‘Let us hope so,’ replied the equerry, voice projected with metallic hint by his armoured suit’s vocaliser. ‘We don’t want you getting bored, remembrancer.’

The front of the Thunderhawk opened, letting in dim light and a wall of noise. I hadn’t noticed how the thick hull had insulated us, but as the crack of light grew wider I caught the staccato beat of boltguns, the boom of

heavier weapons and the crackle of lascannons. Sounds I had only heard before from recordings, now stark in my ears.

The squad moved out first as the ramp touched down, breaking into a run, the thud of their boots deafening on the metal mesh as they disembarked. I followed beside Sevatar at a more casual pace. The sound intensified and the air swirled with dust as we stepped from the ramp onto a blasted street.

I lifted the pict-feed and plugged it into my optical receiver, blink-activating the recording device so that everything I looked at would be available to respool and edit later. That was the nature of the videlith, a raw archive as much experiential as visual, my experience and instinct drawing the view to tell the unfolding story as it occurred around me.

‘Record what you like, but do not go that way,’ said Sevatar, pointing towards smoke-filled sky to our left. Tracer fire and the blossom of half-hidden explosions lit the low clouds, while a pall of blackness spilled from burning towers. ‘The primarch would prefer you stay alive.’

He stepped away, but turned as I spoke.

‘Where are your other remembrancers?’ I asked, suddenly nervous.

‘Some of them were bad at listening,’ he said. ‘Others grew sick of what they saw and left. There are probably a few still around somewhere, but I doubt they are really fit to remember anything these days. War has an unpleasant effect on those that witness but do not wage it.’

‘Plenty of remembrancers accompany the Legions without difficulties,’ I pointed out. ‘Are you threatening me?’

‘No, I am not. And those other remembrancers? They did not watch the Night Lords in action…’

He turned away and strode off, leaving me with my disturbed thoughts.

Wherever I was, the fighting had moved on. I swept my eyes around the vicinity, taking in the nearest buildings and the narrow streets between them. In this area they were mostly two or three storeys tall. Most showed signs of damage but were standing, roofs holed or burnt through.

I moved to the closest and rubbed a hand over its grey surface. It was smooth, not at all like stone or brick. Some kind of extruded resin material, I guessed. There was a film of dirt on everything, ash and dust that came away on my fingertips. I held up my hand, looking at the smudges so that the pict-feed would record it. I saw scraps of metallic material in the

shattered rubble, and pieces of pinkish glass scattered in places. The interiors were decorated in different ways but with familiar styles – papering on the walls with repeated geometric or natural patterns. Carpets underfoot made from tightly-wound fibres. Pictures…

Pictures of humans, which was no revelation. There had been no hint of xenos since my arrival, but it was strange to see picts of people of all ages, their friends and families, playing or posing, or sitting with pets.

So normal.

Even more normal than the lives of the colonists waiting in orbit, who would labour long and hard to bring this world back to a semblance of civilisation. Rebuilding it in a vision more fitting to the Imperium, though from what I saw there was little here that would have caused affront to the Emperor of Mankind.

I moved from home to home, and then came upon a communal building. Judging by the small chairs and tables, the crude pictures on the walls, it was likely some kind of tutelarium.

The more distant bark of guns and thunder of artillery came back to me as I passed through a broken wall into a garden. Trees had been turned to ragged stumps, the beds and lawn churned to mud by the passage of the battle. I placed my foot into the gigantic imprint left by a Space Marine boot, like one of the tutelarium children following the footsteps of their teacher.

I was away from the square where Sevatar had deposited me, and I first thought to head back.

My second thought was that he had been insistent I remain in this locale, but there was nothing here to see, not really. Detritus of the crusade, just like the grain haulers and the ferrocrete mixers and other civilian flotsam that washed up after compliance.

This was not what I had come to see, not what Konrad Curze had promised me.

Drawn by the continuing storm of battle, I headed towards the smoke-shrouded towers further on.

Moving from broken shell to shadow to fallen wall, I kept out of sight of the gunships that roared back and forth overhead. I recorded every glance up into the smog-choked heavens, tracking the blue plume of their jets and the yellow flare of heavy bolters pouring fire into their foes beyond the

broken towers ahead of me.

Despite venturing into the proscribed area I was still blind to what was really happening, the battle some kilometres distant. Unsure exactly what lay ahead, I steered myself towards one of the taller edifices, its two closest sides pocked with weapon marks, the windows blackened by fire in the upper levels.

A vantage point.

Inside was a mess of broken pipes and cables, steam still spilling from a severed utility connection, soaking the ceiling and walls.

I dared not use any kind of elevator or conveyor and found a stairwell, ascending a dozen floors breathlessly in my quest for a better view.

Recording all of it, every one of the one hundred and forty-four steps, I pushed through an access door from a landing and found myself in what seemed to be some kind of medical facility. At least I guessed as such, from the white tiled walls and shining metal cabinets. In an adjacent room were bunks, bloodied bedding spilling from them, footprints and handprints in crimson on the walls. A familiar impact in the tiles dotted every wall, which I assumed was left by bolter rounds. I pushed my finger into a few of them to give a sense of their scale for the pict-feed.

The windows were covered with slatted blinds and I opened one to gaze across the city.

All was ruin, as far as I could see. The city seemed to stretch forever, a vast conurbation, though not of the scale of a Terran hive or arcology. And there seemed barely a building untouched by destruction.

Yet my thoughts for this were fleeting, my eye drawn to movement far below. I zoomed in my optical implant to see that it was a column of people, dressed in their ragged clothes, escorted by a handful of Night Lords.

The line stretched on along winding streets, its destination out of sight, its origin similarly obscured. Thousands of people being escorted from the dying city.

I kept recording, even as I tried again to follow the column of refugees into the distance.

That’s when I made the connection between their route and the black plumes of smoke. They were being herded towards… pyres? Furnaces?

I almost threw up at the thought and staggered back from the window,

sweat prickling my skin as the reaction flooded through me.

This was what Sevatar had warned me against.

I panicked, running back towards the stairs, but through the pulse of my horror-quickened heart I heard the bang of a door opening nearby and voices rising up the stairwell. Heart trying to beat its way out of my ribs, I eased the door open. The footsteps that ascended were booted, but not the armoured thud of Space Marines. The voices, calm and clipped, were accented and not speaking Imperial Gothic. The tone of command told me that they were not civilians, and they were not idly here.

I pushed out onto the landing, knowing if I stayed in the medicae facility I'd be trapped. Shadows from below betrayed how close the hunters were and I headed upwards, just wanting to put distance between myself and these unknown city dwellers. As horrified as I was by the thought of the Night Lords' actions I could not divorce myself from the notion that these people represented some kind of threat that warranted such drastic action.

The door clanged shut behind me as I ascended the steps, its sound echoing through the stairwell. The shout from below that followed was a mixture of surprise and triumph.

Propelled upwards by overwhelming fear, I ran and kept running until the stairs ended. I slammed through the last door and into a maintenance area, the hum of machinery – miraculous that it was still working, I thought – filled the space. But I saw no doors out, save for a small metal opening that I thought would lead to the roof.

There was no other option; my pursuers were clattering up the stairs.

I hit the roof door with my shoulder and barrelled through, hoping desperately that there would be some other exit once I was there.

I stumbled out into smoke-filled wind, two dozen storeys above the city.

There was another shed-like housing ahead of me, but as I set off towards it the door opened, revealing a man and a woman in dark blue uniforms, rifles in their hands.

Even before I processed this predicament I heard a sharp retort from above. The woman's head exploded, followed a moment later by a second snap and the detonation of her companion's chest.

Rapid drumming sounded behind me and I turned to see more of the locals had spilled up from the machine room below, only to be met by a lethal salvo of fire from above.

The roar of the gunship’s jets filtered through my punished senses, accompanied by the continued thunder of the heavy bolters. The crack and whoosh of a launch preceded a blast of heat and noise from the exploding machine chamber, the hot wind almost knocking me from my feet.

The gunship dropped fast, armoured figures spilling from its opening assault ramp in the prow, the squad slamming down onto the roof with bolters ready.

They advanced past me, not giving me a second glance, their weapons occasionally barking as they spied some target in the ruined storey below, now exposed by the missile of the gunship.

A figure approached me, carrying a long-hafted chain-weapon, his face hidden behind a mask of skull and wings.

‘I told you it was not safe,’ said Sevatar.

I looked at this horrific vision of a warrior and heard the bitter humour in his tone. I recalled his offhand remarks concerning dead remembrancers and a new dread replaced the fear of being slain by the city’s inhabitants.

He crooked a finger, beckoning, and then nodded to the Thunderhawk. Though I knew it was likely I was walking to my death just like the column of people far below, I could do nothing except comply.

The flight took only a minute, probably less, far less dramatic than our atmospheric descent. When the ramp lowered again, Sevatar led me out onto another roof, this time of a fortified building.

Curze was waiting there, standing at a parapet, watching the scene below.

My legs buckled but Sevatar caught me, hoisting me up with his free hand, half-dragging me forwards. He dumped me next to an embrasure, so that I could see out into the stretch of city beyond.

It was like looking into a caldera of a volcano, but as I scoured the bright gleam of flames I saw that in fact it was a series of craters, massive holes broken into the foundations of the city.

‘Geothermal energy,’ said Curze, not looking at me. ‘The whole city draws from it.’

I looked closer and saw the lines of people still, being walked to the end of gantries above the flames before being pushed in, an endless stream of ragdoll silhouettes falling into the glow.

‘We brought our own fuel,’ the primarch continued, finally looking at me.

‘They’re still alive,’ I sobbed.

‘No sense in wasting ammunition,’ Sevatar said from behind me.

I stood up, quaking from fingers to toes, but I let my rage steel my stare as I looked at Curze. He regarded me with one eyebrow raised.

‘I don’t know how, but I will make sure that this gets out,’ I told him tapping the recorder box of my pict-feed.

‘I’ll help you,’ said the primarch with a smile. He glanced at Sevatar and then dismissed the equerry with a flick of the head. ‘I *wanted* you to see this. I was waiting for the area to be fully secure, as I’m sure you understand. I would hate myself if something unfortunate happened to you before you could take your recordings back to Terra.’

‘Why?’ I asked the question, though I did not really want an answer, the single word encompassing so much confusion and so broad a horror I could not bring myself to think about it.

‘Why?’ He leaned closer. ‘Are you still recording?’

I nodded dumbly. His face almost filled my vision.

‘Good. This is my message to the lords and ladies of Terra. You wanted to see the Great Crusade, Ennylin.’ He straightened and opened his arms in an expansive gesture. ‘This is it! Those great people of the Throneworld need to see this. Those that would wage war but do not fight it need to remember what it is they have unleashed. This is compliance, is it not? There will be no resistance when we have finished.’

He stepped away.

‘And you will send this not only to Terra, but to me.’ He looked over his shoulder, piercing me with his ebon gaze. ‘Sights such as this will be broadcast to those that would refuse the Night Lords in the future. Let them make an informed decision when they choose to refuse us. How many lives will I save? How many of the Emperor’s servants and my loyal legionaries will live because the enemy capitulates? When they see the price of non-compliance, who would dare withstand us?’

‘You are…’ I could not bring myself to utter the word, the realisation of it was too horrible. One of the Emperor’s primarchs was clearly insane, and the implications of that created a freezing void in my gut. I looked at him and saw a man entirely at ease with himself. He spoke with fluid gestures, no hesitation or inflection to betray the slightest guilt.

‘My father already knows this.’ He directed me to look again at the mass burning and continued to speak. Tears clouded the view and I wiped them

away out of instinct, not wanting to spoil the recording quality. ‘The path of the righteous. The Emperor set me upon this course and I hear no condemnation from Him.

‘This is the conqueror’s truth. The weak pretend there is compromise, that morality gives rise to the grey of acceptance and equivocation. They are misguided. I do the Emperor’s work here. Life is binary. Truth or lie. Guilt or innocence.’

His shadow fell upon me and I looked up into his face, seeing a demigod of death looming over me. His gaze did not move towards me, but up to the skies, as though seeing something else entirely.

‘Compliance, or death.’

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THE SINEW OF WAR

Darius Hinks

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I watched Macragge City burn, listening to the panicked reports flooding down the Neetum Transitway.

‘*Seven* cohorts. Men who were loyal to Libanus, Gallan and Palatinus. They’re murdering and burning. Captain Melotus says they were bribed. *Bribed*, Lord Guilliman. Killing for coin. What have we come to? They tore down the Tomb of Megaricus. They’ve lit fires all along the Proana Arch. They’re fighting outside the Senatorum and Consul House.’

Killing for coin. Every time I heard a grotesque, barbaric phrase like that it reminded me how different I was. I did not think like others. I was a breed apart. Where others saw pieces of a puzzle, I saw the whole. Whether it was military strategy, theology or philosophy, my mind seemed to function on a different level to my peers. Sometimes I found the thought reassuring, other times it troubled me. Why should I be so different? To murder, simply for financial gain, was baffling to me. It was the action of someone lost in the dark; blinded by ignorance and base, animal needs.

The transitway was crowded with people fleeing the violence, and my cohorts had to move frustratingly slowly to avoid killing anyone. Several times our armoured transports ground to a halt as panicked people struggled to move aside. No one *wanted* to get in our path, though. We made a fearsome sight, still filthy from battle, and those that were able scrambled as far from our tattered banners as they could. I continued giving orders as we approached the city, processing information I knew no one else would

register, but the phrase ‘killing for coin’ had summoned a memory.

I was five and my father had taken me hunting. I knew why. Even then I could read people as easily as I read the military treatises in Deucalis Library. My father had seen me watching his generals and magistrates. He saw how I despised them. The greatest statesmen of the greatest city were idiots, blind to the most important resource on the planet – their own, needlessly oppressed people. They were fools and tyrants and, even aged five, I wanted to tear down the whole, hide-bound edifice. My father felt the same, I knew he did. But my place in Macragge was precarious and he was too wise to risk my life on a point of principle. So he took me away, to a place we both loved, to the cold, beautiful foothills of the Crown Mountains where we could breathe clean air and ease our fury by scrambling over rocks and scree. Away from the Senate, my father dropped the pretence that I was a normal child and we hunted together as equals. He laughed, as he always did, at the sight of my unfettered strength, proud of his strange little son. But then, when I saw him fall, grimacing at a gash on his arm, a dreadful truth hit me.

We were not *equals. We never could be. My father was not like me. The man who taught me about life was not destined to live. The flash of crimson on his tunic stalled my breath. One day, Konor Guilliman would die. He would leave me behind. Leave me with the fools and the tyrants. In that moment I became the child I usually only pretended to be. Tears filled my eyes and I placed my hand over his wound, wishing it away. He laughed, shaking his head – not in mockery, but reassurance. He took out a coin and handed it to me. His face was minted on one side and Consul Gallan’s was minted on the other. He closed my hand over it, squeezing it tight.*

‘Feel its strength,’ he said. Strong as I was, I could not crush the metal. ‘The coin is Macragge,’ he said. ‘Beautiful and unbreakable. Made to outlive us all. And while there is a Macragge, I will be with you, Roboute. My virtue is the virtue of Macragge. My strength is the strength of Macragge. This is not just my home, Roboute, it is my soul and it is my family. And it is your family, too. Macragge will endure. Macragge must *endure. And as long as it does, you will not be alone.’*

‘There’s fighting at the Tyrsus Gate!’ Captain Melotus sounded almost

hysterical as we reached the city, and I gave him a warning glare. We had just crushed a revolt that had threatened the whole of Illyria, but seeing war in their own home was another matter. Again, my mind had leapt ahead, and I saw that the two conflicts were actually part of the same whole. The rebels in Illyria planned to overthrow the senate by throwing Macragge into chaos, and now we returned home to find rioting on the streets of the capital. Whoever was behind the first insurrection would no doubt be behind the second. I deployed my men with barked commands, but my mind was still elsewhere. Consul House had been attacked. Was my father there? He was no longer the man who had hunted with me in the Crown Mountains that day, but he was no less impressive. I pitied anyone who tried to take Consul House from him.

I ordered five cohorts to the Proana Arch and five to the Senatorum. The rest I took with me to Consul House. It was dawn. Coral-coloured light flashed over domes and amphitheatres. It looked like the whole city was burning.

We entered the ornamental gardens and I hesitated, struggling to hide my outrage. Even then, barely into my teenage years, I had fought several campaigns, justifying my father's trust with every victory, but I had never seen so much as a lascarbine fired in the capital. Now its friezes were splashed with blood and its colonnades were stained by smoke. I brought to mind the training of my seneschal, Tarasha, and recited her litanies, calming my breathing and clearing my head.

The house was approached by a web of looping paths, designed to mirror the revolutions of the heavenly bodies: Macragge, Ardium, Laphis, Thulium, Mortendar and Nova Thulium, names of legend, sculpted from marble, set in fountains and circled by walls of yew so tall and meandering that they formed a labyrinth.

The crackle of autocarbines rang out through the half-light. I waved a cohort to one side of the maze and a second to the other. Then I signalled for the final cohort to follow me as I sprinted down the central path, tracing the orbit of Nova Thulium.

I was halfway to the house when a soldier ran out to confront me. He had torn the insignia from his uniform and he was swaying, clearly drunk, as he staggered towards me, a gun resting loosely in his hands and leaves stuck in his hair. Three more soldiers followed in his wake, equally unkempt and

unsteady.

The first of them was an ogre of a man, so broad and powerfully built that his gun looked ridiculous in his meaty fists. He laughed as he lurched towards me, raising the autocarbine. Then, when he was close enough to see me clearly, he faltered, his face growing pale.

'Lord Guilliman,' he muttered, the sneer fading from his face. There were corpses in the distance. My father's guards. The man was a disgrace. He had betrayed his people and his uniform. He was a murderer. And the idiot was so thrown by my arrival that he was trying to salute me.

I marched towards him, drew my broadsword and beheaded him.

The drunks behind him were too shocked to react at first. Then they lurched into action, fumbling with their guns.

I drew my pistol and gunned them down in a single, fluid motion. They dropped to the path with smoke rising from between their eyes.

I stood there for a few seconds, pistol raised, waiting for their spasms to subside, waiting for more soldiers to arrive. None came, so I nodded to my men and we marched on past the corpses, making for the front of the house.

There was a fierce gunfight taking place at the steps. A group of ragged soldiers, like the four I had just killed, were hunched at the top of the steps, firing wildly at a second group who had hunkered down next to an overturned ground-car. Its doors had been blasted off and there was smoke billowing from its engine, obscuring the figures shooting from the wreckage.

Shrapnel kicked from the walls as a third group approached from the maze, guns blazing.

I raised a hand, warning my men not to fire until I could make sense of the situation.

The men on the steps were howling drunken curses as they defended the doors, so I marked them down as traitors. True sons of Macragge would never behave so poorly. The men by the truck were another matter – they were too shrouded by smoke for me to know if they were traitors or my father's men.

The point became moot as a rocket screamed across the gardens, fired from the direction of the maze, turning the ground-car into a blinding column of flames.

Shrapnel and sparks rushed towards me. My men ducked but I remained

motionless, staring into the blaze. There was very little in the world that could harm me. I had learned that by the time I was ten. I kept much of the truth to myself. Even my father would have been shocked to know the full extent of my strength. On the rare occasion that something broke the surface of my skin, the wound healed itself in seconds, closing before my eyes. I was either a miracle or a curse; only time would tell which.

Men reeled from the burning truck, robed in flames. I ignored them and strode towards the steps, raising my pistol.

The drunks were so busy jeering at the burning men that it took a moment for them to notice me and, when they did, they were as confused as the men in the maze. Half of Macragge City hated me and half treated me like a saint, but no one in the capital met my gaze with any confidence.

The drunks were still deciding how to respond to my presence when I opened holes in their skulls. They sprawled across the top of the steps, their guns clattering across the rockcrete.

I waved for my men to tackle the group rushing from the maze. They were about to open fire when a familiar voice boomed through the smoke.

‘Roboute! Hold your fire!’

‘Gallan!’ I cried, nodding for my men to lower their guns.

We embraced, then he held me at arm’s length and shook his head, his eyes glinting. ‘I’m glad you’re back.’

Gallan was one of Macragge’s two consuls. Alongside my father he was lord tetrarch of the senate, and senior magistrate of Macragge’s legislative assembly. He was an imposing figure, coming almost up to my chest with a powerful, physical presence that remained undimmed by age. He wore his golden ceremonial cuirass and helmet with the assurance of a man born into leadership. Most of Macragge’s citizens would have bowed in his presence and struggled to speak. I just nodded to the carnage.

‘Who did this?’

He grimaced at the bodies and the smouldering ground-car. ‘The very people it will hurt the most. The people your father’s reforms were intended to help. The idiots took matters into their own hands.’

My men flinched as explosions ripped through Consul House, detonating with such force that the ground juddered.

We turned to face a wall of flames, soaring up the columns and windows, scattering masonry across the gardens. I signalled for my men to fan out,

keeping their weapons trained on the fire.

‘Is my father in there?’

Gallan nodded. ‘He’s been holding the mob back for hours, but everything went quiet half an hour ago. I rushed over here as fast as I could.’

‘I’ve been trying to vox him since I reached the city,’ I said. ‘No response.’

‘Then we should move fast,’ he replied, striding towards the steps and readying his weapons.

The vox in my collar crackled into life, bringing news from my cohorts. They had encountered resistance on both sides of the building and were currently pinned down by overwhelming firepower.

‘Hold your positions,’ I replied. ‘I will deal with this. Make sure no one leaves the grounds.’

The entrance hall looked like a slaughterhouse. Statues of former consuls were draped with bodies and the floor was dark with blood. Gallan and I both halted, appalled by the scene.

‘How could they?’ muttered Gallan. ‘In here, of all places?’

I shook my head, trying to quell my growing fury.

We rushed ahead, guns trained on the shadows as we approached a vast, double staircase that led to the staterooms above. Gallan took one flight and I took the other, with my men trailing after us.

We were halfway up the stairs when soldiers opened fire from the doorway at the top. They were wearing the uniform of the household guard but, like the men outside, they had torn the insignia from their tunics.

The handrail exploded beneath my fingers and I staggered sideways, thudding into the wall as I returned fire, splitting the gloom with a volley of las-blasts.

Gallan ran towards the door, taking two steps at a time, firing into the darkness. My men followed suit, creating an inferno of noise and light, filling the air with shards of alabaster.

There were screams and thuds, and the attack faltered.

I righted myself and charged up the steps, entering the room just after Gallan.

It was a long, tapestry-lined gallery and there were bodies everywhere.

I sidestepped a shotgun blast that smashed into the doorframe, then dropped my attacker with a headshot. Gallan waded into the fumes, firing fast, dropping more of them as I leapt onto a table that ran down the centre

of the room, finishing off the few he missed.

‘Lord Guilliman!’ cried one of my men.

I looked back to see dozens of insurgents rushing up the steps, guns barking.

I dropped from the marble table, shoved it over and kicked it across the room, sending it slamming against the wall and blocking the doorway. Then I waved for my men to take positions behind it.

‘No one gets through!’ I cried, before heading on into the next chamber with Gallan at my side.

Behind us there was an eruption of explosions and battle cries as my men leapt to obey.

We entered another long gallery, lined with colossal bookcases that soared up to a distant vaulted ceiling where plasterwork cherubs circled a painting of Old Earth. Gallan and I paused at the threshold. The lumen globes were unlit and Gallan squinted into the gloom. To me, darkness was barely different to light. It took me years to understand the obsession with illuminating our streets and palaces.

‘There!’ I said, nodding to one of the four doors that led from the room. Figures dashed through the darkness in the hallway beyond.

Gallan nodded and we rushed that way, scouring the shadows for movement.

Gunfire screamed towards us and I heard Gallan curse, rolling behind the plinth of a statue.

‘Gallan?’ I called, looking back.

‘I’m fine!’ he cried. ‘Keep going.’

I marched down the centre of the room, ignoring the shots that howled past me. There is a strange thing about power. The more you have, the less you need. My reputation as unkillable spoiled the aim of even the most skilled marksmen. As I walked calmly to the huddled group at the far end of the room, shots tore through busts and architraves, kicking up a storm of plaster dust.

The rebels were gathered beneath an archway that led into the next room. There were dozens of them, all gripping pistols and swords. If they had remained calm, I might have been in trouble. But I knew they would not. I glared at them, allowing my wrath to burn through my eyes, allowing whatever I was to shine through my skin.

They panicked, some scrambling for cover, others rushing at me, guns barking. I dodged a few poorly aimed sword thrusts and sidestepped the flurry of las-fire, easily hacking down several of my attackers with casual, lethal sword slashes.

The rest backed away, shooting wildly over my shoulder.

'In the name of the consuls,' I cried, 'submit!'

They froze, confused, thinking I was offering them a chance to surrender.

I nodded, acknowledging their obedience, then removed their confused expressions with a barrage of shots. I felt no pity as they thudded to the floor, their faces smouldering and their limbs convulsing. They had turned on the senate. They had betrayed Macragge. There could be no greater justification for summary execution.

'Gallan?' I cried, looking back.

He walked towards me, gripping the bicep of his gun arm. 'I'm fine,' he said, nodding to the next room.

When we approached my father's chambers, the fighting was starting to die down. My men were reporting only minimal resistance now. Gallan and I had dealt with the ringleaders. My father's stateroom was palatial – a work of art rendered in ivory and gold – but the luxurious rugs were all soaked with blood and littered with dead guards, several of whom I had known my whole life. I recited Tarasha's litanies again.

There was an eerie quiet as we reached my father's private chambers. There were dozens more corpses and a fire spreading quickly over a tapestry that covered one wall.

Gallan rushed to the tapestry and tore it down, cursing as he stamped out the flames and surrounded himself with embers. 'Priceless,' he snarled. 'And ruined by barbarians who wouldn't even be able to read it.'

I loved Gallan but he was as strange as all of Macragge's nobles. He had just passed all those dead men, but it took a ruined tapestry to make him angry.

I noticed an odd aroma on the air, bitter and chemical. It seemed worryingly familiar and I scoured my memory, trying to recall when I had smelt it before.

Then I saw movement on the floor near Gallan, near the burning tapestry.

'Watch out!' I snapped.

He backed away and we both raised our guns.

I gasped as I saw a man, crumpled on the floor like a piece of broken furniture.

‘Father!’ I howled, shaking my head. ‘No!’

We rushed towards him, but he held up a warning hand and we stopped a few feet away, both whispering curses. His ornamental cuirass was punched full of holes and his robes were drenched in blood. His leg was bent underneath him at a sickening angle and his skin was scorched and blistered. Worst of all, though, was the dark line at his throat. It looked like a second mouth, wide and leering, dribbling crimson threads. He gasped, trying to breathe, colour draining from his face.

I dropped to my knees, reaching out to him. Again, he waved me away, desperate warning in his eyes. He tried to speak but only managed a hideous bubbling.

For all my strange gifts I could do nothing as he slipped away, choking on his own blood, gripping his throat and trying to sit up. I tore some of my cloak to wrap it around his neck but he pointed a pistol at my face, fury in his eyes.

‘Who did this?’ I gasped, but he did not seem to register my words.

When I stopped trying to touch him the anger left his eyes and he tried to reach for something on the floor.

I grabbed it. It was a coin. It must have fallen from his robes when he fell. I tried to give it to him but he shook his head, indicating that I should close my fist around it.

I gasped as I understood what he was doing. He was reminding me of that day in the mountains. The day when he handed me a coin and promised I would never be alone.

‘No!’ I howled, but he was still pointing his gun at me, refusing to let me approach.

Gallan put a hand on my shoulder but I shrugged him off, gripping the coin so hard it buckled.

For nearly a minute, my father lay there, gun pointed at my head, warning me not to touch him. Then his stare hardened, focusing on somewhere only the dead could see.

As he fell back, so did I, collapsing against the wall, snarling like an animal. Gallan hauled at my shoulders, shouting something, until I realised I had fallen into the shreds of burning tapestry.

I stood and stared at Konor's corpse. I was electrified by rage, every inch of me taut. I dared not move for fear of the violence that might spill from me. My father had not left me, he had been *taken*.

'Roboute,' said Gallan, speaking in quiet, careful tones. 'We should go.'

'Go?' I glared at him. Even as a teenager I was a giant. I loomed over the consul. 'My father lies murdered and you would have me go? You would have me leave him like this?'

'Think, Roboute. The city is tearing itself apart. Would Konor want you to watch over his corpse while his life's work is being ruined? Think of your duty – your duty to Macragge.'

The effort required not to hit Gallan was so great that I could not speak for a moment. But then, as the crackle of las-fire echoed in the distance, I saw the truth of what he was saying. I thought of the coin in my fist, crumpled but unbroken, and nodded.

'The Senatorum.'

He nodded. 'The legislature will have assembled. We must tell them what has been done here. The mob have just robbed themselves of their greatest champion.' He shook his head, looking at Konor's body. 'But they have also risked the stability of the entire planet. There are too many factions vying for power. If there's a consular election now there will be mayhem.' He looked at the bodies scattered around the room. 'This is a dangerous moment.'

I trapped my grief in a corner of my mind and tried to think. 'Macragge has lost one of its consuls today,' I said, holding Gallan's gaze. 'I won't let it lose another.'

I ordered some of my men to guard my father's corpse and, with the rest of them following in my wake, I marched back out into the city, my pulse hammering in my ears and my father's face staring at me from every corner.

As we crossed the city, crowds spilled from every temple and hab-block. I ignored the rioters but not the chainmail-armoured soldiers. Those men saw a fraction of the rage I was holding back. I tried to kill them with the dispassion I was trained to show, but something in me had cracked. I could not stop at simply shooting them. I am ashamed to recall how I vented my rage, smashing walls with their corpses, pummelling skulls with my fists, hurling living men onto fires.

By the time we reached the lawns around the Senatorum, Gallan was

shaking his head, angered by the messages that were crackling in his vox-bead.

He caught me looking his way and grimaced. ‘They want me to stand as sole consul until this is over – until we have restored order.’

‘*Sole* consul?’ I raised an eyebrow. ‘A bold idea.’

‘It goes against every statute.’

‘Well *something* has to be done if we’re going to ride this out. And fast.’ I gave him a pointed look and strode on.

There was fighting all around the Senatorum gates. I was about to lead an attack when Gallan held me back.

‘We need to reach the Hall of Concord quickly. We have to speak to the assembly before they make any decisions.’ He waved me around the building to the entrances reserved for servitors and serfs.

I hesitated, glaring at the rabble by the gates. They were hurling bricks and trying to set light to the banners. They looked drunk, or deranged. Again, I found it hard to think that I was even the same species as such moronic creatures. How could they turn on the state that had given them so much?

‘Don’t let anger muddy your thinking,’ said Gallan. ‘We could be stuck here for an hour.’

‘You’re right,’ I replied. ‘I need to get you to that assembly before it’s too late.’ I ordered my men into battle but then left them to it. We rushed through the darkness to the rear of the building.

The doors were open and, as soon as we entered the lofty halls of the Senatorum, I heard things I knew Gallan would not – as well as the crowds thronging through the streets outside, I could hear the lords gathering in the Hall of Concord. An emergency council had been called. Hundreds of Macragge’s patricians had made it through the riots, determined to make their voices heard. Even from here, I could hear how craven some of them were. There was excitement in their voices where there should only have been rage. They saw opportunity in the bloodshed.

For several minutes, Gallan had been whispering furiously into his vox, talking to whoever was feeding him information from the hall but, as we neared the centre of the building he broke off from his conversation and looked at me.

‘I want you with me on the podium. It’s what your father would have wished.’

I nodded, barely registering his words, still thinking of what I had lost that day.

‘But you can’t appear before them like that,’ he said.

I frowned, confused, then realised he was talking about my battle-gear. I had not changed since returning to the city. I was still clad in chainmail and plate and it was filthy, covered in blood and ash.

He shook his head with a faint smile. ‘If you enter the Hall of Concord looking that brutal there will be a riot in there too.’ He grabbed my hand. ‘We need to be the voice of reason, Roboute. There has been enough savagery today.’

I nodded. All my life I had struggled not to bring shame on my father’s name. Somehow, in the wake of his death, that seemed even more important. I started to unfasten the wargear.

‘Here,’ said Gallan, far better acquainted with the building than I was, nodding to a door. ‘Let the serfs dress you.’

As I headed for the door, Gallan hesitated.

‘I will be quick,’ I said. ‘Go.’

He stared at me, pain in his eyes, then nodded and hurried off.

The room was lined with the woollen togas and mantles worn by the patricians of the legislative assembly. I began shedding my armour as I approached them, the metal clanging across the cold, tiled floor.

I was half undressed when a serf rushed into the room and bowed, closing the door behind him. ‘My lord,’ he murmured, rushing to help me unfasten the armour.

‘That one,’ I snapped, waving at the most understated garment I could spot – a simple blue and white toga without quite so much of the gold embroidery that covered the others.

He hesitated, then seemed to think better of whatever he was going to say and crossed the room to fetch the toga.

As I dressed I noticed something odd. I could smell the same chemical aroma I had smelled in my father’s stateroom. The same, unspoken warning tugged at my thoughts, willing me to make a connection. This time I pursued the thought to its source and an image flooded my mind. The campaign in Illyria had been brutal but satisfying. For every savage we killed, there were ten who listened to sense and dropped their guns. For the first time in my life, I had seen how diplomacy could outstrip force. But the

leader of the revolt, a wiry runt called Zullis, had not been willing to bend the knee. He fought like a rat in a snare, lashing out with the same curved blade I had seen his assassins use. It was covered in neurotoxins, he had said, laughing as he hurled it at my face. I had given Zullis a decisive lesson in manners, but the smell of the poison had stayed with me.

The serf came at me with a grin, his long, curved blade flashing in the half-light.

I dodged his lunge and grabbed his wrist, twisting his arm slowly back until the bone cracked and he howled in rage and shock.

'*You* killed my father,' I said. 'You poisoned him. That's why he warned me away.' My rage had passed beyond the animal fury I felt earlier. It was ice in my veins. I felt less human than ever before. I felt like a weapon.

'Yes!' gasped the assassin, his eyes rolling wildly as he tried to wrench his arm free. He snorted and giggled and I recognised the signs of combat-stimms.

'Why?'

'Money!' he giggled, grinding his teeth, leaning closer.

Breath exploded from my lungs as he kicked me, hard, in the stomach.

I cursed my stupidity as I staggered across the room. He was distracting me. And I was far slower than I should have been. I had not slept for the duration of the Illyrian campaign and then I had returned home to find the riots. Perhaps there was a limit to even my stamina?

He came at me again, wielding the knife in his other hand, but this time I was ready. I sidestepped the blow and landed a brutal punch on the side of his head.

He went down hard, making a wet choking sound.

'Who paid you?' I cried, grabbing him by the neck.

The chemical smell grew stronger and he slumped in my grip, foam forming at his lips.

I dropped him to the floor and watched his death throes, feeling no pleasure in his pain. Foam bubbled from his mouth and the smell intensified further. He had bitten a capsule. Probably the same toxin that was on the blade.

I rushed to the door. As I did so, I saw something lying next to my armour – the coin my father had bade me take as he died. I snatched it up and then, as I ran out into the corridor, I halted, noticing something odd

about it. I stared at it and, under the harsh light of a glowglobe, I saw the truth. ‘No,’ I gasped, bending the coin back into shape and looking at it again, not wanting to believe. Then I ran on.

When I entered the Hall of Concord, Gallan was already on the podium, trying to quell the noise. Macragge’s aristocrats had turned on each other with almost as much violence as the mobs outside.

I had emerged at the back of the podium and Gallan continued shouting as I approached him from behind.

‘And I don’t just mean Konor, I mean his son too!’ he cried, hammering his fist on a lectern. ‘*They* brought this ruin on our heads. They risked everything we hold dear! I watched Konor leading the rabble into Consul House. If it wasn’t for the bravery of my men he would have burned the whole building down. He murdered dozens of loyal soldiers before we could stop him.’

The crowd fell quiet, shocked, whispering to each other.

‘And as for his son, that arrogant interloper Roboute. What more could we have done to welcome him into our homes? And this is how he repays us! I saw him, not ten minutes ago, in this very building, trying to fight his way to this chamber with the very traitors he claimed to have been fighting in Illyria. What was he *really* doing out there? Plotting to overthrow us! We stopped him, but it was a close thing. I had to kill him myself.’

As I stepped closer to Gallan, light washed over me and the crowd gasped, staring at me in confusion as Gallan described my death.

‘I’m not ashamed of what I did!’ cried Gallan, misunderstanding their shocked expressions, still unaware of my presence. ‘He was a traitor to Macragge and I was not prepared to let him step foot in this hall. I ended his treachery in the only sure way I could.’

I finally spoke up. ‘I was with my father when he died.’

My words rang out into a shocked silence.

Gallan paled as he turned to face me.

‘And I asked him who was responsible,’ I continued, placing the assassin’s poison blade to Gallan’s throat. ‘He could not speak, but he gave me the name of his murderer all the same.’

Gallan looked panicked and confused as I took out the coin and held it in front of his face.

‘Very rare, I imagine,’ I said, turning it around in my fingers. ‘Mistakenly minted. Rather than showing both consuls, the same face appears on both sides. *Your* face, Gallan.’

Gallan laughed. ‘You’re alive! This is wonderful. I heard you were killed.’

I glared at him. ‘I heard *you*. I heard everything you just said.’

His smile froze and for a moment he seemed at a loss. Then anger flashed in his eyes.

‘What right do you have to come in here making threats? You do not belong here, boy, you never did. Where did you even come from? Do you even know who your real father is? You’re lucky I didn’t kill you when…’

Gallan’s words trailed off as a hum of angry voices swelled through the hall. Some of the patricians began jeering and swearing. For a moment I thought it was directed at me but then I realised their outrage was for Gallan. Of course. Whatever their politics the nobles of Macragge agreed on one thing – to lie in the Hall of Concord was beneath contempt. And my presence had shown them what a fraud the consul was.

I pounced on their moment of doubt, speaking to the room with the calm, magisterial tones I had perfected speaking to the Illyrian rebels.

‘My father *never* lied to you. Whatever is happening today is nothing to do with him or his reforms. *Nothing* meant more to him than this senate. And he grasped truths lost on men like Gallan. A tyrant’s power is brittle and short-lived. It dies with him. But a state that frees its people grows more powerful every year. Each new generation has more to fight for than the last. More reason to serve. We can arm Macragge with the loyalty and faith of our subjects. We can make it invincible.’

Gallan’s face was purple with rage. ‘Idiots! Yes, I killed Konor. And who do you think I did it for? Who do you think will pay for the freedom Konor promised? Whose lands do the mob want to seize? Yours! It’s your power they want. Your money. What do you think you would be if Konor’s reforms were passed?’ He was almost screaming. ‘You would be nothing! No better than the common herd! Centuries of tradition, torn down by one ill-conceived act of charity!’

I prepared to end his words, tightening my grip on the knife, recalling the pain in my father’s eyes as he died.

Then I realised the senate had fallen quiet, watching me closely, fascinated by the lurid scene that was unfolding on the podium. In their expressions I

saw the future. If I killed Gallan I would prove him right. I would be the savage rebel he claimed I was. Any other truths would be overlooked in the resultant clamour. There would be a frenzy of recriminations and plots. They would turn on each other. While the city died, its leaders would bicker, letting Macragge burn while they tried to raise one hereditary claimant over another.

I thought of the savages in Illyria, dropping their guns for a place in the dream I described to them.

I lowered the blade.

Gallan looked at me in shock as I stepped away from him.

'It is not the job of a single man to pass judgement,' I said, looking out across the crowd. 'It is the job of the senate. Macragge is greater than any of us. Gallan killed my father, but I would rather see him go free than tear this council apart. If you would have this man as your consul then so be it. But you heard him lie to you. He has admitted it without shame. And you must choose your course of action quickly.'

Gallan's eyes gleamed. He struggled not to laugh, so sure that no one would listen to me over him.

'Traitor!' cried a voice from the back of the hall. I looked through the ranks of patricians and saw that one of them was pointing a trembling finger at me. No, not at me – at Gallan. I recognised the man. Adarin. A man who had always despised me. And a man who had denounced my father's reforms. But Adarin's anger was now directed at Gallan.

'Traitor!' cried another voice, then another, until a great wave of denunciation washed through the hall.

Gallan reeled like a drunk. 'Idiots!' he screamed, spit flying from his lips. 'These people will rob you of everything. Think of what your fathers built. You will end up–'

His words turned into a howl of outrage as soldiers grabbed his arms and began bundling him off the podium. His fury turned to panic. If he were convicted of deceit in the Hall of Concord, he would face a death sentence.

I watched until he had been dragged from view, still spitting curses, then I climbed down the steps and started back across the hall to rejoin my men.

Adarin pushed his way through the crowd and barred my way, his face grim.

The hall fell quiet.

He stared at me with such murderous intent that I thought I might have to fight my way out. I had meant everything I said on the podium, but I would not stand by while my men were battling outside. I would not leave them to die.

Adarin did something unexpected. He removed the metal wreath from his head and dropped it at my feet.

There was a hiss of indrawn breath around the hall. Everyone understood the symbolism of the act. He was swearing allegiance to me.

I wondered if he was mocking me, but he looked completely earnest.

‘I don’t know where you came from,’ he said, ‘and I no longer care. I have never heard a truer son of Macragge. Your father lies slain, not a kilometre from here, and you have just spoken calmly and clearly in the face of his murderer. You put the needs of the senate before your own pain. You are an example, Roboute Guilliman.’ He looked around the hall. ‘To all of us.’

I shook my head but, before I could reply, the man next to him removed his wreath and dropped it beside Adarin’s. Then another man did the same. One by one, the patricians all pushed forwards to drop wreaths at my feet until I was surrounded by a pile of golden leaves.

Pride and shock rooted me to the spot. ‘Macragge will endure,’ I whispered, thinking again of my father’s prophecy, not intending to be heard.

The acoustics of the hall snatched my words and cast them across the crowd.

‘Macragge will endure!’ replied five hundred voices, as the council began to kneel.

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THE CHAMBER AT THE END OF MEMORY

James Swallow

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Night no longer existed above the domains of the Imperial Palace.

When Terra’s sun set beyond the ragged mountain peaks of the ancient Himilazian Range, a thousand smaller stars were lit to bathe the great precincts in a hard, white light, so that the armies of drone-helots, smiths and stonebreakers could toil on in their labours. Floating high over the Hall of Victories and down towards the Sprawl Magnifican, a fleet of autonomous aeronefs bearing huge lume arrays ensured that day never ended, the glow spilling all the way to the Katabatic Slopes and the outer fringes of the Petitioner’s City.

His golden wargear glistening in the endless light, the primarch Rogal Dorn observed the progress of the great siege work of his design. His hard-edged aspect sombre and vigilant, he stood aboard a disc-like contra-gravity platform.

Dorn’s only company was a mech-servile. The device resembled an avian, a hawk of some kind, and it carried upon its back an upright oval frame like the mount of a mirror. There was no glass in the surround; instead it pulsed with lambent blue light, throwing hololithic panes out in front of Dorn as he moved around the platform’s edge. Now and then, the Imperial Fist would reach into the holo-casts and make an adjustment or shift a data-point. Even at this late stage, there were always details that required his individual attention.

The smallest error in the gap between two flagstones could open a crack

that would fell a shield wall. A single overlooked decimal in the wrong place could see a macrocannon magazine run empty in the thick of an assault.

Nothing must be left to chance. For Dorn, these words had become his mantra. *All points will be defended. All doors barred.* There would be no failure on his watch. This he swore, this oath he reaffirmed with each lost dusk that passed, as his errant brother's invasion drew inexorably closer.

Horus Lupercal, may he be forever hated, would soon come to the Imperial Palace, to directly challenge their father the Emperor. Dorn knew that hour was almost at hand; he felt it in his genhanced blood and bones. When Horus' blighted ships darkened Terra's skies, and unleashed their traitors and the creatures that were their allies, these walls beneath Dorn's armoured boots would repel them. No stronghold in the entire Imperium, not even the Fists' mighty star-home *Phalanx*, was as fortified as the bastion of the Emperor's Palace.

At least it will be, if my works are finished in time. I can only hope it will be enough. Dorn grimly nursed the thought as he directed the platform to take him north, in the direction of the Tower Aquilane. The mech-servile came with the primarch, moving to perch on the disc's safety rail. He made more notations, redirecting a legion of masons and steelmakers from their duties at the Inner Gardens towards efforts on a series of anti-Titan revetments in the Western Quad.

Too many operations were running behind schedule. Too many things were going awry. Some incidents were to be expected, of course, but Dorn knew the difference between accident, error and sabotage.

There had been open attempts to disrupt the construction in the early months, attacks against machinery and men by deluded devotees of Dorn's errant brother. The Imperial Fists and the Custodian Guard had largely brought such brazen acts to heel since then, but one did not need to drive a loaded promethium tanker into a building site to ruin a work. Subtle interferences, small deeds in the right places, could have massive consequences. A misplaced shipment of metals. A helot legion going underfed. A measurement on a blueprint made a few degrees off true. In a building project of such epic scope as the fortification of Terra's capital, these things could prove fatal.

Dorn released a slow, dissatisfied breath as he found a datum lying out of

synch, and pulled it back into place. A gale of white vapour from his exhale briefly wreathed him and dissipated.

He could have undertaken this duty in a photic projection chamber on one of the Bhab Bastion's command tiers, but it was more immediate to be up here above the cityscape, up in the polar cold and thin air that would have frostbitten a mortal. Dorn needed to look with his own eyes, not second-hand via hololiths.

It was real this way. Up here, the Imperial Fist could hear the ceaseless clatter of pneu-hammers and the chipping of stone. He could taste traces of dust and the exhaust of machines as they laboured under the perpetual daylight he had put in place.

Darkness would fall soon enough when Horus arrived, and all those common souls who dwelled within the walls of the Imperial Palace would beg for the light.

Dorn looked down as the platform drifted to a halt. He was above the Investiary, and he looked upon the great building and frowned. It was the perfect exemplar of the crimes he had committed against this magnificent labour of men, this palace of ultimates.

Once, the Investiary had been a great amphitheatre two full kilometres wide, a beautiful arena to cradle wonders brought back from across the galaxy. Dorn had shed a few drops of sweat down there, fighting in sporting duels with his kindred, beneath the gaze of the towering statues that bore the likenesses of his brothers.

But now it was a massive munitions store, repurposed into a colossal powder-house accommodating megatonnes of conventional shells, para-batteries and promethium casks. Dorn had made it so because the arena's central location put it in good range of all this quadrant's gun emplacements, and the sunken design was tough and durable. It had been a delight to behold, once. The Imperial Fist had transformed it into something blunt and unlovely.

'When did I lose sight of that?' His words crackled in the cold. At some point, Dorn had forgotten the beauty, forgotten that he was sullying what made this place so incredible. It had been lost in the myriad needs of the war, fading beneath the weight of the duty; the weight of new stone, like the brutalist bulwarks that now masked the once-glittering spectacle of the Investiary's ornate walls.

Would you tear them all down?

The question rose in his memory. Malcador, saying the words to him, down there on the floor of the amphitheatre. The Sigillite and he, in better days, when the suspicions between them had not been so open, so bitter.

Another casualty of the conflict, he thought. *Something else lost – or discovered – in the chaos of this siege-to-come.*

His reverie was drawn from him as the cyber-hawk emitted a warning cry, a split-second before a peal of thunder reached Dorn's ears.

As he pivoted in the direction of the sound, he picked out a curl of black cloud rising up from a minor donjon towards the centre of the Indomitor Bastion. There was a survey crew in that zone, checking redundant buildings for suitability to be cut down, their granite foundations to be used as buttresses elsewhere.

But that area contained nothing of import, so he recalled, nothing that could explode with such force, only art galleries and the like. Malcador had told him to leave that quadrant alone, Dorn recalled, citing the inestimable value of keeping safe its fragile esoterica. But such things would mean nothing if the walls protecting the Palace were weak, he had countered.

'The needs of the war,' he muttered, taking the platform's controls in his giant's hands. Rescue flyers, alerted by the same alarm that had stirred the hawk, would already be launching to investigate the explosion, but Dorn was close and could get there first. He put the disc into a steep dive and sent it towards the source of the smoke.

It was a depository minaret, one of thousands of similar buildings that existed all across the precincts of the Imperial Palace. An ugly burn scar defaced one side of it, and through the rent in the construct, the black smoke was already thinning, fading.

Dorn stepped off the grav-platform and saw where the survey crew had left their ground transport waiting in the courtyard. The big, six-wheeled machine lay silent, and the primarch's nostrils twitched as he approached it.

Blood, within. He smelled human death, the particular tang of it well known to him, without the heavy compound odour of legionary vitae or the acridity of something xenos-born. He came upon a dead man lying half-out of the driver's seat. The body of the work-ganger was slack and still warm. His eyes were crimson pearls, and dark fluid oozed from his ears and his

mouth.

Shock death. Dorn categorised the method of the man's ending with a warrior's dispassion. Catastrophic overpressure or a pulse-wave weapon could have killed him in such a manner, but secondary damage did not support that conclusion.

The primarch drew a weapon of his own; the formidable master-crafted bolter dubbed the *Voice of Terra* had been presented to him by the Adeptus Custodes, on the day he had been anointed as Terra's Praetorian. Glistening gold like his power armour, the gun shimmered in the false daylight as it led Dorn into the shattered minaret. He moved with caution; if Horus' insurgents had grown bold again – if this was their doing – the threat could be grave.

Within the tower he found a curious architectural anomaly. The building concealed a long corridor, a false arcade dotted with clever archways designed to trick the eye of the unobservant. More dead men littered the floor here, all of them killed in the act of fleeing. Dorn paused to examine the nearest and found the same fashion of death as he had upon the work-ganger in the transport. Blood-red eyes staring sightlessly up at him, a face twisted in agony.

Something subtle and distant in his thoughts pushed at Dorn to go no further. And by rights he should have done exactly that, waiting for the Arbites to arrive, waiting for the medicae and their servitors. This site was still a danger zone until someone could fathom what had happened here, and many would have said that Rogal Dorn was too important to concern with something so minor.

But Rogal Dorn was never one to accept the idea of a thing he could not do. He strode forwards, advancing down the arcade at a march, scanning every shadowed corner and dark alcove for anything that resembled a threat.

The further he walked, the worse the manners of the deaths became. The primarch found workers whose limbs appeared to have exploded from within, killed instantly by intense hydrostatic impulse. Other bodies ended at the neck, the stumps haloed by a mess of shredded brain matter and bone. And further still, there were the dead who could no longer be recognised as human, their corpses turned into a crimson-black slurry painted up over the ornate marble pillars and pale ouslite ceiling.

With each step he took, the forbidding pressure inside Dorn’s thoughts took form and gained potency. It was as if the corridor itself did not wish him to walk within it, as if the very walls were trying to repel him. Unbidden, his pace slowed to a halt and Dorn’s armoured gauntlet tightened around *Voice*’s grip.

The end of the corridor was within sight, and he could see it concluded in an anteroom dominated by two great doors that were scaled for transhumans. Even from this distance, Dorn could surmise what had happened.

He saw the dying plasmatic flame of a cutting tool where it lay on the tiled floor. The worker who had wielded it was a red mess now, perhaps the same unfortunate fool who had cut into the shattered seal that previously had walled off the anteroom from the rest of the world.

What did they trigger in here? What line did they unwittingly transgress?

There were symbols on the doors. Dorn took another wary step, narrowing his eyes to see them clearly.

And so he did, but before the fullness of his discovery could be processed, a pungent acid reek seeped into the air. Dorn recognised the spoor of witchery. He had walked into a trap.

Eldritch fire burst from points on the pillars, the walls and the floor. Arcane symbols lit up, revealing themselves where wards had been carefully concealed in the ordinary designs of tile and stonework. Psionic kill-forms, shrieking masses of inchoate ectoplasm formed from warp-matter, attacked the primarch from all sides.

He battered them away, his bolter rising to blast the ones that were beyond his reach. Each dissipated with a concussive howl of power, hitting him with shockwaves forceful enough to make even the Stone Man recoil.

Dorn retreated a few steps, gathering himself, and the ephemeral attackers drew back towards the psychic cantrips that had spawned them. His jaw set, the primarch picked out and put huge mass-reactive rounds into each origin point. As the shots blasted open the stone, thin spurts of organic fluid leaked out and he saw what might have been blobs of cultured cerebral matter buried in the walls.

Psionic trip-mines, he reasoned. Warp-weapons that had lain dormant here until the work gang had unwittingly triggered them. These things were defensive artifices, to protect what lay beyond the chamber at the end of the

corridor. But such devices had no business being here. Dorn glared at the distant doors once more, then stalked away, back towards the courtyard.

When he stepped out into the false day once more, the cluster of Arbites and rescue specialists who had arrived in the flyers fell into line and made the salute of the aquila. Dorn did not return it, pausing only to order the senior incident officer not to enter the corridor.

He cast a glance up into the night sky, beyond the burning lights aboard the aeronefs. Dorn tapped the vox bead in the gorget of his armour, opening a priority channel to the *Phalanx* out in orbit.

'Heed me,' he told his warriors. 'You will go to the Seclusium in the bowels of our fortress. On my authority, open the gate there and recover one of the brothers you find within.' Dorn shot a look back at the rip in the minaret's wall, as the full weight of the decision he was about to make fell upon him. 'I require a Librarian.'

'Your will, my lord,' came the reply.

The primarch did not acknowledge the reply, his thoughts dwelling on what he had seen in the anteroom at the end of the corridor. A pair of giant's doors, built not for men, not even for a legionary, but for one of greater stature.

Upon those entrances, laser-etched into the metal, the symbols for the numbers *two* and *eleven*.

Yored Massak emerged from the troop bay of the Stormbird and scowled at the hard, directionless glare from above. Like any Inwit-born son of his Legion, he had not paused to question why he was suddenly summoned from his meditation in the deep spaces of the *Phalanx*, accepting that this was by the order of his gene-sire, and thus as immutable as if the command was carved into granite.

But now, as the Imperial Fist set foot on Terra – and within the bounds of the Emperor's Palace, no less – it was difficult for him to silence the torrent of questions that flooded his thoughts.

Ever since the Decree of Nikaea had forbidden the use of psykers such as himself from line duty among the Legiones Astartes, Brother Massak had willingly surrendered his status within the warriors of the Librarius and followed Lord Dorn's edict: to accept isolation in the great psi-negating

Seclusium chamber along with his fellow practitioners, and *wait*.

The Decree cast them as liabilities to their Legions, as potential vectors through which the dangers of the infernal warp might enter the material realm. There was truth to that threat, Massak could not deny, but he had always believed that the sons of the VII Legion were beyond such things. They were the Imperial Fists, the mailed gauntlet of the Emperor. They did not break, whatever the trial.

Some – those of weaker character, those caught in moments of despair – had dared to think that Lord Dorn had abandoned his Librarians as the Warmaster's rebellion grew to overwhelm everything, but Massak eschewed such sentiments. Their primarch obeyed his father's word, as the Fists obeyed the word of theirs. When the moment was right, Dorn would call them back to the line. They would be ready when he needed them.

Was that moment nigh, Massak wondered? Before him, his liege lord stood as a towering, gilded sentinel, one hand resting on the hilt of his baroque chainsword, the other at his chin as he mused. The Librarian bowed and slammed his fist across his breastplate in salute.

'I answer your summons, my lord.'

'Brother Massak,' Dorn intoned, giving him a measuring look. 'I have need of your unique skills.'

'I stand ready.'

His gene-father was silent for a long moment. He seemed troubled.

'In any other circumstance, you would not be here. But there is danger here… Its origin is unclear to me, but your insight will not be so clouded.' The primarch told him of the explosion, the dead survey crew, and weapons hidden in the walls of the corridor.

Massak's head bobbed in a shallow nod as he took this in, and the Librarian couldn't stop himself from reaching up to gesture at the inactive psychic hood affixed to his power armour, and the force sword sheathed at his hip.

'I will confess, sire, that I did not expect this, nor to be given my weapons and wargear.'

Dorn held up a hand. 'This is not the day,' said the primarch, anticipating Massak's question before he uttered it. The legionary's heart sank as his master went on. 'The moment you hope for is not yet at hand, my son. But there is danger here, in this place. Of the kind you and your kindred are best

suited to understand.’ Dorn pointed at the minaret. ‘You will walk with me. You will tell me all that your preternatural senses reveal to you. Know that this is not a decision I have taken lightly, or in haste. This defiance of my father’s commands has been forced upon me.’ Then his primarch said the words that left Massak both elated and filled with dread. ‘For this day, I grant you respite from the Decree of Nikaea. Put your talents at my command once more.’

‘Your will,’ whispered Massak, and a flood of ghostly potency shot through him. The crystalline matrices of his psychic hood hummed, and the warrior felt renewed, alive, *empowered*. He was a blinded man suddenly given sight once more, his ephemeral talents surging back from the dormant state they had languished in for so long. Massak took in a breath, centring himself.

Immediately, a flood of psychic after-images buffeted the Librarian’s sensorium. He felt the current of fear and awe in the humans standing in the courtyard, as the motes of their commonplace life-forces orbited around Dorn’s fiery, potent self. Massak moved past these surface perturbations to the resonant echo of the death-howls that still hummed in the places where the survey crew had perished.

Dorn entered the corridor and Massak fell in step at his side. At any other time, the warrior would have been proud to be in such circumstances, but not now, not here. The air was filled with foreboding as much as the reek of murder.

He cast his gaze over the bodies and the blood, seeing the shape of them through the veil of the real and into the shadow realm of the immaterium, which seethed like an invisible ocean beneath the physical world.

The men and women of the work gang had died fast – or rather, their corporeal forms had. Their psionic essences, what idolatrists might have called their souls, were still in the process of slowly being torn apart. The psi-weapons that had stripped their energy from their crude matter were cruel and potent things. It struck Massak that the devices were overpowered for such simple targets as ordinary humans, and gravely he relayed this to his gene-father.

Dorn gave a grunt of assent. ‘Are there more?’

Massak could sense them as they progressed along the corridor. ‘Aye, lord. I fear, if anything, more potent than those already deployed. Waiting for a

trigger.’ And there was something else, a peculiar telepathic mark in the making of these things that Massak knew but could not place.

A signature, he decided. *The psychic fingerprint of the one who seeded the weapons in this place.*

‘Awaken them,’ ordered Dorn, bringing his bolter and his chainblade to the ready.

Massak drew his own sword and reached inside himself for the sleeping lightning he knew lurked in his bones. The crystals in his psychic hood flashed white and the Librarian cast out his hand, releasing a bolt of energy along the corridor’s length.

The lightning flickered and bounced from wall to floor to ceiling, and in each place it touched, stone burned away to reveal more hidden wards that seethed with arcane power. Shrieking, protean globes of pure madness erupted from their hiding places and swarmed them.

‘Advance!’ snarled Dorn, and he sprinted into the mass, meeting the attack with an incredible, focused ferocity.

Massak put aside his desire to merely stand by and watch the primarch at his art, and fought his quarter of the brief engagement. Swords screamed, bolts thundered, and the warriors beat down the mindless kill-forms, obliterating every one of them.

When it was done, Dorn marched on, and Massak tarried behind him. The Librarian went to each origin point for the psi-forms and ran his force sword through the glyphs carved there, rendering them unable to regenerate. As he caught up to his master, Massak heard the rumble of his words cutting through the air.

‘I know these rooms,’ mused the primarch, as they reached the chamber before two great doors. ‘I remember them… They were on the other side of the Palace.’

‘Is that possible?’ said Massak. ‘How could–?’

His words became ashes in his mouth as a terrible silence gripped him.

The Librarian was bombarded by psionic sensations. Not just the agony of the newly dead and the torture their spirits were enduring, not just the hateful echoes of the psi-forms, but the shadow of a gargantuan psychic presence. A mind of intricate, lethal magnificence, its passage invisibly marbling the walls where only one such as Massak would be able to perceive them.

The full power of it was concentrated in the doors. To the right, a brass portico bore the numeral *II*, in the old way of scribing. To the left, an identical entrance rendered in steel was etched with the numeral *XI*. Massak beheld those ill-fated symbols and the genhanced blood in his veins ran cold.

‘The Second and the Eleventh.’ He could barely say the words. It was forbidden to speak of them, by the censure of the Master of Mankind Himself. Every son of every Legion, be they loyalist or traitor, knew the rumours of the twin tragedies of these lost titans, the truth of their losses forever shrouded and unknowable.

Once, the Emperor had forged twenty sons from aspects of his own being, Rogal Dorn one of the mightiest among them. But two primarchs had been struck from the rolls of honour long before the Warmaster’s rebellion, each consumed by a catastrophe of such fell scope that few knew the full dimensions of it. Massak could only call upon rumour and half-truth for his knowledge, but as he looked up at his gene-father’s face, he knew that Dorn held the bleak memory of that disaster deep in his hearts.

‘My brothers…’ Massak’s primarch put away his weapons and walked to the doors. Dorn reached out both hands, and placed the palms of his gauntlets on the metal. The psyker had rarely seen such reverence, such reluctance in the Fist’s actions. ‘If you were here now, what would be different?’ Dorn asked the question to the cold, acidic air, as if he had forgotten that Massak was still with him. ‘How would the course of this war be altered, if you stood with us? Or with *them*?’ He shook his head. ‘I wish I could know.’ At length, Dorn withdrew his hands and glanced back at his warrior son. ‘What will be said of them in the deep future, I wonder? Will they be remembered, Massak? Will we?’

The question seemed to bring Dorn physical discomfort, and Massak watched the muscles harden in his lord’s lantern jaw.

‘What is this place?’ The Librarian forced out the utterance. ‘The very air itself is heavy with psionic potency.’

‘These are the chambers of my lost kindred,’ said Dorn. ‘I have my own quarters within the Palace’s domains, as do all my father’s sons. They are rarely used, but maintained in case of need. Those of the traitors were sealed at the beginning of their treachery…’ He paused, frowning as he looked back at the doors. ‘But these… they should be elsewhere.’

The creeping, inexorable growth of inevitability rose in Massak's mind, as his recollection connected the psionic spoor around them with a point of origin. He remembered. He *knew* the telepathic signature. He knew who it belonged to.

Massak had stood in the presence of the author of this artifice, many years ago, during the Triumph at Ullanor. The psychic aura was as potent and distinct now as it had been then, lingering in the ether as whispers of unearthly might.

'The Sigillite,' whispered Massak. 'This is his work. The traps, the door, the seals. My lord, it is as clear to me as if he had cut his name into the walls!'

'You are correct,' said Malcador, his robes rustling as he entered the anteroom from the corridor behind them. His black iron staff clanked against the bloodstained tiles of the floor. An icy, searing fury glittered in the old man's eyes, and Massak felt the colossal pressure of the Sigillite's mind crushing his in its grip. 'You should not be here, Rogal.'

'I know this place,' Dorn countered. 'Or do I? The memory is hazy. It is indistinct. *How is that possible*?' The primarch shouted the last, his voice booming. 'My father made us with perfect recall! We forget *nothing*! And yet…' He gestured at the air.

Malcador turned his gaze on Massak and nodded towards the corridor. 'Leave us. What will be spoken of you shall not hear.'

The Librarian tried to open his mouth to protest, but he could not. Moving without his conscious control – struggling, *failing* to command his own flesh – Massak turned on his heel and marched away, down the corridor, towards the distant light.

'How dare you, Sigillite.' In other times, Dorn would have shown decorum, he would have refused to allow himself to exhibit the ire that ran through him now like molten steel. But alone with the old man, there was no need for such an act of politesse. 'My sons are not playthings for you to toy with at a whim!'

'He cannot be allowed to recollect what he has seen here. For the good of all, he'll need to forget.'

Dorn's ire flared. 'You disrespect my Legion. You disrespect me!'

'And the Imperial Fists have never disrespected the Regent of Terra.'

Malcador's retort was sardonic.

'I hold the office in high esteem,' Dorn countered.

'But not the man?' Malcador gave a bitter chuckle, but in the next breath it was gone. 'You should not have entered the corridor, Rogal. I told you to stay away from these buildings!' He peered grimly at the blood on the walls. 'Now you know why. This intrusion must be undone. It will be edited from history as if it never occurred… I will attend to it.'

'You lied to me about this place,' Dorn replied, frustration written across his aspect. 'Can you do nothing else, Malcador? Even in the simplest of your utterances, must there always be falsehood?' He jutted his chin at the seared remains. 'The deaths of these loyal Imperial subjects are added to your tally, not mine. But I doubt you would even notice them.'

If there was regret in the old man, Dorn did not see it. The Sigillite did not answer his statement, and instead made one of his own.

'I can imagine what is going through your mind at this moment. I have no need to read your thoughts. You wonder if I am a traitor… Not one like your brother Horus, grasping at naked power and fuelled by enmity, but a man out for himself. A schemer and player of games.'

'In your mind, you are loyal,' Dorn growled. 'I do not doubt you can justify every bloody action you have ever taken. But you are *some* of those things.' He looked away. 'The Sigillite plays the galaxy as if it were his own private regicide board. This place? This is another shrouded gambit of yours, another buried secret. I know it.'

'I am doing what you decided on!' Malcador's temper flared, and with it, the plasmatic flames within the iron basket atop his staff crackled fiercely. 'I have only ever done what I was tasked to do!'

'Another lie?' Dorn stared at the twinned doors as if he could see past them by sheer force of will. 'A half-truth, at best?'

What would he find within those chambers if he entered? What answers would be gleaned, what guidance might be hidden inside? Some said that the tragedies of the lost primarchs were precursors to the schism the Imperium now faced. Could it be so?

'I have never lied to you,' Malcador insisted. 'Kept things from you, yes. Directed your attention elsewhere, indeed. But there has always been truth in our dealings. Disbelieve me if you wish, but know this. Of all your kindred, Rogal, you are the one I admire the most.'

‘Don’t flatter me,’ he shot back. ‘I care not for it. I want answers, old man! You sent Massak away, you have your privacy. Speak!’

‘This place is hidden for good reason. The legacy of the lost holds within it too many doubts, too many harsh truths that would do nothing but damage the balance of our precious Imperium. Now is not the time to pull upon those threads, Son of Inwit!’

‘If not now, when?’ Dorn demanded. ‘What if there is an answer in there, a way–’

‘A way to end the war?’ Malcador shook his head. ‘Those are the words of someone cursed with hope! I tell you now, there is nothing but grief behind those barriers.’ He sighed. ‘Perhaps, when the scales are balanced once more and Horus has been brought to heel, these questions can be asked. But only then!’

‘I knew them.’ Dorn took another step towards the doors, silently reaching for deep memories of the two brothers. Not all the primarchs could say they had breathed the same air as the lost sons, but Dorn was one of the few. He had been with them, if only for a while.

‘Have you ever wondered why none speak of them?’ the Sigillite replied. ‘Of course, there is the censure over all who know of the lost never to talk openly of their existence. Still, in the absence of fact, all men will speculate. But you do not. The primarchs never speak of their lost kinsmen in anything but the vaguest of terms. Have you ever wondered why that is?’

‘As you said, we are forbidden to do so.’

‘Even when you are beyond your father’s sight? Even when no one would be aware of such a discussion? Ask yourself why your thoughts always slip over recall of the lost and pass by.’ Malcador bowed his head. ‘What were they called, Rogal?’ The Sigillite seemed almost sorrowful as he asked him. ‘Your vanished brethren. Tell me their names and their titles.’

Dorn tried to grasp that vague recollection, tried to frame the questions that gnawed at him, but once more his perfect eidetic recall *failed* him. He could only see the phantoms of those moments. Holding on to them was like trying to capture smoke between his fingers.

‘Their names were…’ his mighty voice faltered. His brow creased in frustration. ‘They were…’

To his horror, Dorn realised that he *did not know*. The awareness was there; he could almost see the shape of the knowledge out on the far horizon

of his thoughts. But it retreated from his every effort to see it clearly. Each time he attempted to frame a memory of the lost, it was like fighting a tidal wave. *Everything else is clear, but they are ghosts in my mind.*

The Imperial Fist was experiencing an impossibility. Every known instant of his life was open to him, as if they were pages of a great book.

But not those moments.

'Something has been done to me.' The beginnings of a new fury built in his chest, boiling at the realisation of such an affront. 'You are behind this!' Dorn whirled, drawing his chainblade in a glittering arc of lethal metal, bringing it to aim at Malcador's wizened, cloak-wreathed form. 'You shrouded my memories! You invaded my mind… For that I should cut you down!'

The Sigillite showed no reaction to the threat. 'Not just yours. Guilliman's, and the others who met them.' He let his words bed in. 'It is extremely difficult to extract a reminiscence,' Malcador went on. 'Even in an ordinary human. In a brain as complex and perfectly engineered as that of a primarch, the task becomes herculean. Imagine a tree in the earth, rising from a web of roots. How would one remove that without disturbing a single atom of the soil? Memory cannot be cut and patched like a mnemonic spool. It exists as a holographic thing, in multiple dimensions. But it can be *adjusted*.'

'My father allowed that?' Dorn's sword did not waver.

'He did not stop you.'

'Stop *me?*' The primarch's eyes narrowed.

Malcador slowly moved back, out of the ornate sword's killing arc. 'The… loss of the Second and the Eleventh was such a wound upon us, and it threatened the ideals at the heart of the Great Crusade. It would have ruined all that we had built in the drive to reunite humanity, and drive off our enemies. Steps had to be taken.' He met Dorn's hard gaze. 'The legionaries they left behind, leaderless and forsaken, were too great a resource to be discarded out of hand. They did not share the fate of their fathers. You and Roboute argued in their favour, but you do not recall it.' Malcador nodded to himself. 'It fell to me to see that they were attuned to new circumstances.'

'You robbed them of their memories.'

'I granted them a mercy!' Malcador replied, his tone wounded. 'A second

chance!’

‘What mercy is there in a lie?’ Dorn thundered.

‘Ask yourself!’ The Sigillite aimed the burning head of his staff in the primarch’s direction. ‘You wish to know the truth, Rogal? It is this – what I shrouded in you was done by *your* command! You told me to do it. You and Roboute conceived of the scheme and granted me permission!’

Dorn’s scowl deepened. ‘I would never countenance such a thing.’

‘Untrue!’ Malcador slammed the base of his staff into the floor, the crash of the metal punctuating the word. ‘Such was the fate of the lost, that you willingly allowed it. To make safe that knowledge.’

Another denial formed in Dorn’s throat, but he held it there. He put aside his anger and looked upon the possibility with detachment, with the cold eye of the Praetorian.

Would I have done such a thing? If the matter were grave enough, would I have been so pragmatic, so bloodless in my command?

Dorn instinctively knew the answer. There was no doubt that he would.

If the Imperium was put at risk, he would give his life for it. The cost of some memories, of a fraction of his honour, was indeed a price he would pay.

Malcador approached him, leaving his staff where it stood. One bony, long-fingered hand emerged from the voluminous sleeve of his monastic robes, and the Sigillite reached up to hold it before Dorn’s face. Faint sparks of eldritch light glistened there.

‘I will show you,’ said the psyker. ‘For this instant, I will let you remember. You will know why the lost must remain a mystery.’

Dorn closed his eyes and a glacial fire erupted behind them. Deep within him, a shadow briefly dissipated, stealing the breath from his throat.

He marched along the length of the blood-stained corridor, and with each footfall the reawakened memory retreated deeper into the darkness.

Dorn could feel it fading. He knew that by the time he reached the end of the passageway, the totality of it would be gone. The truth he had glimpsed, hidden, revealed and now to be hidden once more, became transitory and ephemeral.

He did not question what Malcador had shown him. Dorn knew his own mind, enough to be certain that the Sigillite had not projected some

conjured illusion into his thoughts. Awakening from the induced reverie, barely seconds had passed, but for the primarch he felt the weight of days upon him. The Sigillite, for all his allusions, was nowhere to be seen when Dorn opened his eyes.

There was still much that the psyker had said and done which the Imperial Fist did not accept, and although Malcador had professed to have been truthful with him, Dorn had doubts that would never ebb.

But not in this matter. In this, he was certain.

The lost were gone, and it was well that they were. The grand misfortunes that befell them crumbled in Dorn's mind, but they left behind certainty.

What came to pass could overshadow everything. Dorn knew that now. *The raw, hateful truth is clear to me. If they were here with us now… This war would already have been lost.*

He emerged into the false daylight and found Massak awaiting him. Behind the legionary, the rescue crews and the Arbites kept their distance, knowing that what had happened inside the tower was not for them to question. By tomorrow, none of them would remember what they had seen.

'My lord,' began Massak. 'Forgive me, I was compelled–'

Dorn waved away the apology. 'You did your duty, Yored.'

Massak accepted that with a nod, then glanced back at the gaping crack in the minaret's flank. 'And with regards to the chamber? What are your orders?'

The primarch paused for a moment, searching his thoughts for unanswered questions. The memory of what had been spoken of inside the minaret was already gone, faded to nothing. He found only a granite-hard determination of what needed to be done.

'Bury this place,' he told Massak. 'It is only a tomb now. It will be forgotten.'

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FIRST LEGION

Chris Wraight

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The *Nightsward*’s back was bleeding, torn along the spinal ridge with entire comms towers ripped from their foundations. The frigate’s engines rattled arrhythmically, beating out a limp staccato that made the decks throb and shudder. Long scars ran down its outer flanks, each one the product of nightmare weapons still barely understood by the gunnery sergeants. For all that, it was still in service, still on duty, pushed out hard spinward of the main fleet deployment, just like hundreds of others. There was no alternative, this far out, and no complaints from those who had survived.

Captain Arnaid stood on the strategium deck, surrounded by the staff of his tactical command, assessing the options ahead of him.

‘Not Rangdan?’ he asked.

The question was not superfluous – the Rangdan xenos, in addition to their many other abilities, had proven able to mimic the sensor profile of many Imperial warships.

‘No, lord,’ replied Holfad, the master of signals. ‘Absolute certainty.’

‘But not one of ours either,’ said Arnaid.

‘Not this far out,’ agreed Ertha, the ship’s mistress. ‘Unless a casualty.’

Arnaid smiled darkly. ‘Much like ourselves, then.’

Ahead of the gathered officers and legionaries, over a black hololith column, spun the schematic representation of near-space – a lattice of runes and trajectory skeletons. The image flickered from time to time, hit by the *Nightsward*’s faltering power generators, but Arnaid could see enough to

share Holfad's assessment. The ship on the scopes was Imperial, larger than they were, and heading on a corkscrewing course through the void that would eventually take it, if not intercepted, under the plane of the main Dark Angels fleet. The ship did not appear to be hurrying, which was unusual, for the northern fringe of the extermination zone was not a place to tarry without purpose.

'Still no reply to hails?' Arnaid asked again.

'Nothing,' confirmed Holfad.

Arnaid weighed up the options. Their last encounter had left them badly damaged and with heavily depleted ammunition stores. Mounting any kind of assault, particularly against a larger vessel, would be difficult. The prudent option would be to report the sighting and then shadow, hoping that a Legion ship of the line could respond before the fleet perimeter came within range. Then again, the entire complement of Legion vessels was already accounted for and fully occupied, caught up in the punishing round of tit-for-tat brutality that had marked the six-year-long xenocide campaign. They would not want to be pulled from duty unless absolutely necessary.

'Move to engage,' Arnaid commanded. 'Full combat order, make preparation for boarding.'

The *Nightsward* swung around onto the intercept course, shifting with commendable agility given the state of the plasma drives. Soon the frigate was boosting through the void, tracing the geometry laid in by the navigation master.

Arnaid reached for his helm. He was still in his armour – none of the Legion ever took it off any more – and felt the familiar suck-hiss as the atmospheric seal took. He walked down from the tactical bridge pulpit to meet the five surviving members of his command group. He could see from his helm's sensor-scatter that the remainder of his company – the 45th, of the Eighth Order, of the First Legion – were already racing to take up boarding positions. There were only a few torpedoes left, but they had Stormbirds in the hangars still, and the close-range broadside gunnery was in reasonable shape.

'Not Rangdan?' asked Talladan, first squad sergeant, hefting his chipped bolter sourly and checking the ammo-counter.

Arnaid could forgive the repeated query. They had been fighting the xenos for so long, with such sustained, attritional violence, that it had come to

seem as if no other opposing force existed in the galaxy, and across the entire lifetime of the Legion there had never been an enemy that had tested them as much.

‘Not Rangdan, sergeant,’ Arnaid said, reaching for *Bloodspite*, his power sword. The blade was Calibanite, expertly wrought from dark metal with a long snaking dragon etched along the facing edge. ‘A conundrum, but the truth will out.’

Proximity klaxons began to chime, and the close-range sensors began to display their quarry. Arnaid summoned a hololith cube and zoomed the focus.

It certainly looked like one of theirs – Imperial, with that familiar dagger-prow, hunched back and heavy shielding. A Rangdan warship was all spines and flails and trailing metal tentacles, like an iron jellyfish cast adrift in the void.

‘Still no reply to hails,’ reported Holfad, calling out from behind his nest of cables and picter lenses.

Arnaid watched it come closer. ‘Ready broadside,’ he ordered. ‘Athwartships, no damage-shot unless I so order.’

‘Damned fools,’ muttered Talladan. ‘Don’t they know this is a warzone?’

‘I doubt they are unaware,’ said Arnaid, observing the ship come into visual range. ‘Sensor mimicking has cost us – they may be being cautious.’

The details of the ship were obvious now. It was unmarked, dark-grey like unpainted ceramite, a slab of unvarnished metal hanging in the dark. It appeared undamaged, which was a rarity in this region of the galaxy, and powered along capably with its thrusters firing clean.

‘Ready warning shot,’ ordered Arnaid. ‘Maintain standard hail.’

The interloper moved into the danger zone. There was no sign of its own weapons being run out, nor of gunship wings being loosed.

Arnaid drew in the breath that would have given the order to open fire, when finally his sensor-arrays flooded with incoming data.

‘A transmission, my liege,’ said Holfad.

Talladan growled low in irritation, a sound that echoed darkly within his helm. ‘What games are these?’

‘Show me,’ said Arnaid to Holfad, taking his hand slowly from the hilt of *Bloodspite*.

A hololith burst into half-scale instantiation, showing the ghostly outline of

an Imperial Space Marine. His armour bore no insignia, and looked as blunt and unadorned as the ship he came from. The armour mark was newer than Arnaid's – Mark IV rather than the First Legion's widespread Mark II – and, like the ship he came from, showed no sign of battle damage.

'This the First Legion ship-of-war *Nightsward*,' Arnaid said, adopting the formalities. 'You are undeclared and entering the proscribed Rangdan extermination zone. Power down and prepare for inspection, or I shall be forced to engage.'

'There will be no need for that, captain,' came the Space Marine's voice. It was an odd voice – lighter than the average for a Legiones Astartes warrior, though with the usual supreme self-confidence. 'We had to be sure we were in the right place. These xenos have proved adept at mimicry, we understand.'

Arnaid's eyes narrowed. The subterfuge annoyed him. If this genuinely were an Imperial vessel, then without demonstration of a genuine cause the hide-and-seek felt pointless.

'Declare yourself,' Arnaid said, blink-clicking an order to the gunnery captains to remain on alert.

'A friend,' came the reply, with perhaps a hint of a smile audible in the helm-hidden words.

'There are no friends in the void,' said Arnaid, initiating the pre-firing cycle and moving his gauntlet back to his blade-hilt. 'Your final chance.'

The hololithic head bowed a fraction. 'Your reputation for bravery is not misplaced,' he replied. 'Even given the odds here, the condition of your ship, I believe you might actually fire. Very well. This is the strike cruiser *Perseus*, nine weeks out of Raf Deep-Anchor. Forgive the lack of identity – we do not as yet truly have one. The Twentieth Legion will do, if you insist on such things. And as for me, Captain Arnaid of the Forty-Fifth Company of the Eighth Order of the First Legion, you may call me Alpharius.'

He runs, body close to the leaf-matter, the stink of the mulch on his feet. The moonlight bars the ground faintly, for the clouds are running and the shadows are deep.

He is panting. His body is superlative, a gift beyond price, but he has been running a long time and even he has limits. He remembers, dimly, a time before this one, when it was all the howl of another reality, of whispered

voices and the echoing cry of the infinite. He does not know how he came to leave that place and enter this one, overlooked by these iron-hard trees and their nightshade canopies. He does not know his name, nor his past, only that he is *here*, on a world that carries death in the sap of every twig and pain in the cry of every beast.

He runs harder now, letting the fatigue pull at him. It is as if he has to get used to having a body; as if, once, he was just an idea or a belief in another's mind. He is caked in dirt. He is latticed with scratches. One wrong turn, and you are up to your waist in sucking mud, or caught in briars with thorns the length of a thigh. This world wants to kill you. It wants to kill everything.

He carries a weapon in his hand – a horn, discarded from the picked-clean corpse of another great beast. He has stabbed it many times into creatures that would have ended him, had he not got there first. He has plunged it into the flanks of the horrors of the wood, feeling the hot, black blood gush over his hands before it cut down into the bone. Now it is like a part of him, jabbing out from his fist, a mere extension of a body that does not belong in this place, that has been transplanted here and has to learn how to master its surroundings.

The beasts are everywhere. They fight one another, they fight the weak, they fight the strong. They leap through the canopy, their leathery wings pinned tight. They lurk in the undergrowth, tiny eyes burning under the thick snarl of tortured growths. There are beasts at the roots of the world, curled fast around its snaggling tendrils in the ancient soil, too massive to move, too bloated to breathe. You could never kill them all, not if you had eternity to spare. A few must always linger, poisoning the black earth.

He seeks higher ground, dropping to all fours to scrape his way up the bank. He is naked, but his skin has become very tough. He will have to find something to drape over himself – the flesh of another beast, a blood-flecked hide, pulled from the meat of something he kills. Until then, the wind flails him, cold as lies, dragging at his long hair.

It will rain soon. The moon-silvered heavens will break, dousing the earth and the spear-sharp leaves until all is a foment of bubbling slime and filth. This world is always in flux, the bark creaking, the earth sliding, the night's gales shaking the boughs.

He ascends with labour. He slips, and feels the catch of thorns on his

calves. He staggers, and feels the cool mud well up between his toes. For a moment, he thinks that the dark and the clinging brambles will choke him at last, wrapping themselves around his neck and hauling him down, but then he breaks the rise, charging out and up, wrestling free from the clutch of the limitless forest.

He is exposed then, upright against a churning sky. Black rocks jag into the racing air, whipped by the wind. He can finally see a long way, thrust up onto the outcrop that juts clear of the all-smothering canopy.

The clouds are tearing, re-forming. The treetops shake, rustling like bags of snakes. Ahead of him is the great valley, delved like a wound in the world, twisted and gasping with its competing growths of grey, black and darkest green.

He must go down there. The greatest beast of all is in that place, hunting him just as it is hunted. This one is the nightmare of the deep wood, the canker that turns this world against itself, the gall that has no salve. He cannot turn aside from it, for it knows of him as surely as he knows of it. He can smell it in the leaf-mould, and see its foulness in the oily pools that linger under the arched roots.

He hesitates. There is a part of him that falters. He sees the cloud-barred stars again, just for a breath's intake, and knows that, once he ducks back into that light-gobbling netherworld, that he will never truly leave it. He wonders if there might be an escape, a place to hide, to wait until the storm has passed and the kills can be made by other, greater animals.

But there was never that choice, not really. The nightmare is calling him, beckoning him down into the valley, waiting to test him. Mastery of a world like this belongs to those who can stare into the abyss.

So he coils, he hunches, and then he is running again, down, down, down and into the dark.

The stranger was brought over to the *Nightsward*. He came without an escort. A counterpart team led by Talladan travelled to the *Perseus*. It felt like a hostage-exchange. After the transfers, the two ships lay immobile in the void, waiting for clearance to proceed.

Arnaid took Alpharius to his own chambers. He did not request that he remove his weapons. By the same token, he kept his own within reach.

On the way from the shuttle hangars, the newcomer looked around

carefully, drinking in the surroundings. ‘I heard you take your homeworld with you,’ Alpharius said, staring at the carved stonework over the bulkhead lintels, the lanterns burning softly in their alcoves.

‘All Legions do,’ said Arnaid. ‘Even yours, I imagine.’

Alpharius smiled. His shaven head was elegant, with a bronze-edged hue to his skin. His armour was dull and blank, though it clearly worked well enough – in comparison to Arnaid’s battle-ravaged plate, he looked as if he had just stepped off the forge production-line.

‘You have very many questions, I expect,’ Alpharius said.

‘It matters not what I wish to know,’ Arnaid said, reaching the doorway to his chambers and extending a hand. ‘If you are who you say you are, the *Invincible Reason* will have the necessary records.’

Alpharius hesitated on the threshold. ‘You’re not even slightly curious?’

‘Curiosity is not much prized, here.’

‘Interesting. With us, the opposite is the case.’

They went inside. The space within was all Calibanite orthodoxy – stone walls and floors, naked flames in braziers, weaponry hung on iron racks next to battle-records and embellished lists of the dead. It had a sombre kind of beauty to it, redolent of the draughty war-keeps of the forest world, and Alpharius seemed to be observing it all carefully.

‘Tell me of the Rangdan,’ he said.

Arnaid sealed the door behind them. ‘They are an abomination,’ he said, flatly. ‘The end is in sight now, thankfully.’

‘It has been a hard campaign.’

‘As all are.’

‘Not like this one, I think.’

Arnaid found that he did not like Alpharius much. There was a distinct sense of superiority in his manner – nothing overt, but there nonetheless, as if he were young and fresh and clever while all about him was mouldering in the past, exhausted and ready to fade into obscurity.

‘They have proved hard to wear down,’ Arnaid admitted. ‘We have never truly been able to neutralise their ability to foil our tactical instruments – every fight is unbalanced, fought on terms that are seldom of our choosing. At the start of this, the difference was the Emperor. Now, it is the primarch. I would swap all their subtle devices for his presence. He has been their destroyer.’

‘Yes, that is what they are saying on Terra.’

‘We have not had word from Terra for a long time.’

‘It’s still there. But how stands your Legion, after six years?’

Now it was Arnaid’s turn to smile. ‘You wish me to give out details of our deployment? To you, who do not even wear a company badge?’

‘Forgive me. Curiosity, like I say. But this ship has taken serious damage.’

‘We fought a Rangdan Harp-ship, off the Uriba Angle. Two of ours were lost, we scraped out intact. A high toll, but every one of those we end, the closer this thing comes to completion.’

‘And you are still on patrol.’

‘None can be spared. Not now.’

‘Doing your duty,’ said Alpharius. ‘That is important to you.’

‘Of course. As to you.’

‘You are a serious Legion. You do not laugh, you do not boast. You are here, on the edge of the known, bleeding for the Imperium. I wonder how many of the worlds you protect know that.’

Arnaid shrugged. ‘Few of us would care.’ He moved across to a low stone altar, over which a secure comms station had been erected. He activated the link with a gesture, waiting for the coils to warm. ‘I am a Terran,’ he said. ‘But I spent time on Caliban, and that is all you need to do, to understand this Legion. On that world, the darkness is always creeping back. You torch the forest, and it comes back. You cut the trees down, and they rise to smother you again. So they ride out, again and again, striking down into the defiles, hunting for the worst beast in the worst brake. They slay it, and then they may have an hour, or a day, or a week. But something will come back again. So you are always riding. You do not expect thanks. You do not think of it as duty. It is life, and to live it is the source of all honour.’

‘Some would call that pride.’

‘Some?’

‘Some.’

‘Well, if it is pride to trust in your weapons, in your war-keep, in your liege, then I have no quarrel with that.’

‘Could another Legion have done what you are doing, here?’

‘I do not know.’

‘But you doubt it.’

‘I trust in my weapons.’

‘And in your liege?’

The comms station suddenly blushed a dull red, and the lens filled up with runes.

‘You will be able to find out for yourself,’ Arnaid said, studying the incoming screed. ‘Word from the flagship, and all is granted. Consider yourself fortunate – the Lion wishes to speak to you in person.’

As he runs, he grows stronger again. The scent of blood is in the storm-wind, splattered on the leaves and pooled in the root-curls. Even as the rain starts, he smells it among the rival smells of the deep wood – the decay, the fungus, the sweet drift of carcass-spoor.

The undergrowth is sodden now, shining in the wavering moonlight. The trees are like the bars of a prison, massive and unyielding.

All paths lead him downwards now, away from the dying light and into the troughs and sloughs of the twilight realms. Birds scream overhead, their wings snapping as they burst from their eyries. Lesser creatures cower in sets and dens, their eyes like black jewels, their claws pressed tight into the dank earth.

The sickle-curve horn is in his hand, dripping with rainwater. He grips it so tight he thinks now that he shall never let it go. The further in he travels, the more the stink of his enemy grows in strength. Everything is stained by it, here. The heartwood reeks of it, the mires reflect it.

He shoves his way through a tangle of thorns, and they rake at his back. He skids on the loose mud, and nearly loses his footing. There is no place for stealth – all scents are out in the open. He must be like a shadow of the storm, leaping through the flickering half-light, using his speed and his power to overwhelm the nightmare that waits for him.

He has heard tales of the creature from many mouths. The beasts sing of it, and they cower; the birds crow of it, and they shudder. Perhaps that is why he has come to this world. Perhaps only he could ever have had the strength to wrestle such a creature to the blood-rich earth, to throttle it and stamp its entrails into the sucking mulch.

The smell becomes overwhelming, an equine musk, a tang of iron. He is close, he is very close. The sky splits with a flare of lightning, serrating the lashing heavens, and he sees the stark black spine of the wind-bent trees.

It is there, pawing at the ground, holding court within its narrow clearing,

its nostrils wide and steaming.

He does not hesitate. He leaps, bursting from cover with the tendrils of the grasping wood trailing from his shoulders. The nightmare charges him, thundering right back at him, making the earth hammer under churning hooves. For a second, he is in the air, suspended, blade high, staring at it. The storm growls again, flooding the clearing with a second flash of silver fire.

It is enormous, clad in a shell of black iron, its eyes hidden, its shoulders curved under armour. It carries a long straight blade that glints dully against the storm's cold fire. Too late, he sees that it is not one beast there, but two – a rider and its mount, each armoured, each colossal, glossed and slicked in the streaming rain.

He strikes out with the horn, and drives the tip against the creature's armour. The horn shivers in his grip and shatters. The nightmare lashes out, swinging its great blade two-handed. The blow is impeccable, too fast to evade, too strong to survive. He feels the dark iron bite deep, rending his own flesh as he once rent the flesh of other beasts.

He howls, and the world spins. The nightmare thrusts again, point-first now, aimed at the heart with unerring precision. He tries to scrabble away, but is pinned, and this time the agony is all-consuming. He can feel the howl of the netherworld coming for him again, the dissolution from which he came, and knows the price of failure.

The nightmare is looming over him now, drenched with both storm-rain and thrown blood. It looks haggard and grotesque, a foul parody of old nobility.

'First Son,' he snarls, summoning speech from the bowels of his rapidly dissipating body.

It twists the blade, and comes so close that its eyes are almost visible between the narrow slit of an iron helm.

'You are the death of this world,' he spits.

The nightmare crunches its spurred boot onto his neck, choking the last vigour from his corporeal husk.

'Call me by my name,' it tells him, in a voice of such studied, arch contempt that it burns his peeling flesh away. 'The hunter. The slayer of beasts.'

Arnaid was given the honour of accompanying Alpharius. The *Nightsward* made its way from the fringes of the engagement zone towards the heart of the grand fleet. As they travelled, Arnaid saw the state of the ships – hacked and marred and gouged, all of them, like herd animals bearing the claw-scars of predators. The numbers were down on what they had been, and even some of the big battle cruisers appeared to be missing.

They passed through a number of challenge-stages, each one overseen by a larger warship, until they were heading into the congested centre where the true leviathans stood at void-anchor. There was no mistaking the flagship – the *Invincible Reason* was long, lean, dark and spare, like a spear of obsidian against the void. Its gothic turrets still reared proudly from its back, though many were blackened from xenos particle flayers and some whole sections had been stripped from the adamantium superstructure.

The final approaches were shadowed by Legion Stormbirds bearing the hexagrammatic sigils of the Ravenwing. Despite giving the correct pass-ciphers at every stage, primed guns overwatched them the whole time. That was standard procedure in the extermination zone, but Arnaid couldn't help but wonder if it had more to do, on this occasion, with the passenger he carried with him.

They passed under the shadow of the *Invincible Reason*'s main hangar and entered its cavernous, echoing embrace. Once disembarked, they were met by an honour guard of paladins, each draped in ivory cloaks over nightshade-black armour. They were escorted courteously, but firmly, to the turbo-lifts and grav-lines, after which they swept through the many halls and armouries towards their destination.

On the way, Arnaid stole occasional glances at Alpharius. He liked to think that the newcomer would be impressed – the *Invincible Reason* was by a distance the most famous ship in the Imperium. It had been the first of the Gloriana class, and in its subsequent service a vindication of the Emperor's ambition to create something so vast, so powerful and so fast that nothing in the galaxy would ever rival it. For a long time it had been the only such vessel in the entire crusade, and the very rumour of its presence was sufficient to quell warzones and hasten compliances. Now a number of other Glorianas had been put into service with other Legions, but the old lustre from this one was still not quite gone. Every hammerbeam roof and vaulted alcove spoke of sombre, patient craftsmanship, the melding of the

mechanical genius of Mars with the dark, lethal majesty of Caliban.

Eventually they reached the primarch's private chambers, and Arnaid prepared to withdraw. As he did so, one of the paladin escort prevented him.

'He wants you too, captain.'

And so Arnaid went in. He walked alongside Alpharius up the long nave, his boots treading into the rush mats laid over cold granite. He passed the banners of the Legion's many companies and battalions, all hanging stiffly in those mournful, candlelit shadows.

The Lion was waiting for them on a throne of white alabaster, a long, ermine-trimmed cloak hanging from his shoulder in a heavy cataract of velvet. A battery of hololith projectors had been set about the throne, and all were active, showing schematics of more than a dozen active void-engagements. As ever, the primarch's silent presence proved quietly dominating, like the cold pressure of night air before the onset of a storm. Perhaps, though, as one got closer, it was possible to detect a degree of strain in those chilly eyes, a faint weariness hanging over those great shoulders. So many had died here, slain by an enemy that had nowhere to run and so fought with all the desperation of a cornered beast. Many more would die before the end, whatever tactical genius was brought to bear on the remaining engagements, and so every planned deployment was scrutinised, checked and revised, over and over again.

It was said by some that the Lion cared not for his warriors, and would sacrifice any number of them to achieve a strategic advantage. That rumour, though widespread, could hardly have been further from the truth. This primarch had been raised amid the Order, for whom fealty and feudal obligation were everything, and so every death of those sworn to his service weighed heavy on his austere soul. If he chose not to show that emotion, thus giving rise to whispers from lesser men, that did nothing to reduce the burden. He was a closed book, the Lion, though one whose secret pages were etched with the blood of those he led.

'Captain Arnaid,' he said as the two of them approached the dais. 'I was appraised of your recent service at Uriba. You give honour to your Order.'

Arnaid bowed. 'The honour is mine, lord primarch,' he said.

The Lion turned to Alpharius. Arnaid stole a sideways glance too, and was satisfied at the erasure of smugness on the Space Marine's face. There could be no gentle air of superiority here, not in the presence of a true son of the

Emperor.

‘And you,’ said the Lion, resting a great gauntlet on one armoured knee. ‘What am I to make of you?’

Alpharius bowed. ‘Whatever you wish, my lord. I am here to answer your questions.’

‘You come from a Legion that does not exist, and give a name that has no correspondence in any record,’ the Lion said. ‘You show no badge and give no assurance, and yet demand an audience here, in the heart of my fleet and on the eve of coming battle.’

‘The Twentieth is real, lord, as you can plainly see,’ Alpharius said. ‘And, if I may say so, I do not think its existence could ever truly have been a secret to you.’

‘I had heard rumours. A Legion of ghosts, they said, coming and going without leaving a thread to ravel. But a Legion needs a primarch, and you have none, so by what right do you give your warband the title?’

‘Legions existed before their primarchs, even this one. We are the last, but our master will be discovered in time. Perhaps then we shall become more than ghosts.’

‘Or perhaps you won’t.’

‘The choice will be made for us, that is certain.’

Arnaid watched and listened. Though superficially different, there was something disconcertingly similar about the way the two of them spoke. It was as if the words were only surface-deep, and that the true import of what they said was still unspoken, locked in hidden caskets of meaning.

‘Tell me why you are here,’ said the Lion.

‘I bring a ship, containing a company of our finest warriors. There are others coming, all apt to be placed under your command. They will serve faithfully and without question. We have studied your war against the Rangdan, admiring it from afar. The xenos will not prove a surprise to us. Take the offer, and this will be over far more swiftly.’

‘A generous gift. It comes from my father, does it?’

‘It comes from ourselves. We have a certain… licence, in this, at any rate.’

‘There are many Legions fighting in this crusade. No others have offered us help. Why should you?’

‘We wish to see the crusade completed.’

‘So do all my brothers.’

‘We wish to see the Rangdan destroyed.’

The Lion’s visage hardened. ‘Let me advise you a little, ghost,’ he said. ‘There are those of my esteemed brotherhood who possess warm hearts and ready humours. They are tolerant men, who will listen to the tales of travellers with indulgence, enjoying such discourse just as they enjoy their plays at combat. I am not like them. My heart is not warm, my humours are sour. I have seen my Legion bled to the marrow by this war, and now spend every waking hour striving to preserve what is left. We have killed so many in these charnel-systems that our hands may never be free of the stain of it, so if you value your neck then start speaking the truth – I do not keep this sword at my belt for idle show.’

Alpharius’ eyelid twitched, just a little. The serene visage frayed at the edges, just a little. But he held his ground, and he held the primarch’s gaze.

‘You must be Warmaster, my lord,’ he said.

The word lingered in the shadows, an unfamiliar echo in those grey and sombre halls.

‘What do you mean?’ the Lion asked, warily.

‘The day will come,’ said Alpharius. ‘The last primarch – ours – will be found, and then this pretence at equality must end. An emperor does not lead his armies once his generals are in the field, and this one will be no different. Do not feign ignorance, my lord, for you cannot be unaware of what has long been talked of among your brothers.’

‘You bring danger on yourself, with these words.’

‘I merely state what must take place,’ Alpharius said. ‘You were the first. Your Legion was the greatest and the most numerous. You should be preeminent still, the first choice for the station that must come in time. In conception it was you. It still can be.’

‘You speak as if the decision has been made.’

‘You are destroying yourself in this war. The Thirteenth Legion is now more numerous for the first time, though its master is a pale shadow of you. If you continue to absorb this rate of attrition, you will never overtake them again. Others have risen in favour, too – the Tenth, the Sixteenth. There is a crown ordained for you, lord, but it is slipping from your fingers.’

‘And you can restore it to my brow.’

‘Yes, if you withdraw your strength now. Let us complete what remains of this task, while you recover your numbers. None could doubt your valour

for what has already been done. Return to Caliban and build anew, and none will also doubt your right to rule.’

The Lion thought on that. His steep brow furrowed for a moment, and armoured fingers drummed across his knee.

‘And you would be kingmaker,’ he said.

‘No obligation would be placed on you.’

‘Then why make the offer?’

Alpharius smiled, in what seemed like almost embarrassment. ‘Because we have been created the same way, your people and ours. You know what it is to keep both a promise and a secret. You know what it is to carry the blade on your belt and the one under your cloak. If Guilliman is made master, none of this will survive. That is why.’

The Lion smiled for the first time then, as chilly and hard-edged as any of his gestures. ‘One day, if the fates allow, your own primarch will be found. Why not place your hopes in him?’

‘We are not what you are.’

‘And what are we?’

‘The First.’

The Lion did not respond for a moment. He seemed to withdraw into himself, as if those two words were as much a curse as an honour.

‘Go, now,’ he said, grimly, pulling the cloak a little closer about himself. ‘Return to your grey ship and your empty flags. You will have my answer within the hour.’

After Alpharius had left, the Lion turned to Arnaid.

‘What did you make of that?’ he asked.

‘A strange offer.’

‘Very. Do you agree with his assessment of the war?’

Arnaid hesitated. ‘It is not my place to–’

‘Your honest view, captain.’

‘He’s right.’ Arnaid lifted his gaze to meet his primarch’s. ‘We will win here, but we will also leave much of our strength in these stars.’

The Lion nodded. His eyes flickered briefly across the various tactical hololiths, all buzzing with runes and deployment vectors.

‘I had a dream last night, Captain Arnaid,’ he said, thoughtfully. ‘I dreamed that I was back on Caliban, before my father had come, when the

deep woods were still alive with horror. I was in the mind of a beast, come to slay me. Or perhaps the beast was in my mind, and it was the hunter. I do not recall ever meeting such a creature in life. As I ended it, it spoke to me. Did that ever happen, truly? I do not know.'

Arnaid listened, a little awkwardly, unsettled by the glimpse, however slight, into his primarch's inner life.

'It, too, called me the First,' the Lion said. 'I cannot have known what it meant, then. Ever since, though, the title has been both honour and burden, hung around our necks like lead weight. Now we have more ghosts emerging from the void to tempt us with future visions of a greater politics to come. Always, at every turn, such ghosts have been there, believing they know what I must wish for, or must do, or must be.'

The Lion smiled a second time, a little less coldly.

'A Warmaster,' he said, musingly. 'A first among equals. The ghost is no doubt right – something like that will surely come. And, if we persist in fulfilling our oaths here, we damage our chances of taking it. Every creature of temptation, it seems to me, comes out of the shadows bearing words of truth. That is why they are dangerous – we are used to lies, on a world made of them. Only truth imperils the soul.'

'Then, should we…' Arnaid ventured.

The Lion looked back towards him, a flicker of dry amusement lingering on his face. 'Should we what, captain?'

'Should we accept the offer?'

The Lion sat back in the throne.

'The offers change,' he said. 'The answer never does.'

He comes out of the trees on foot as the sun rises, his armour bearing the mark of many claws. The rain has long ended, but the air is still grey and heavy with moisture, the land is sunk into mire, the tracks waterlogged and the fields lumped with sod and clay.

Ahead, on the horizon, his war-keep rises into a grey sky, its black walls crowned with pennants. It is enormous, built to subdue the land around it, but even so, set against those trackless forests beyond, it seems like a fragile dominion. Men and women are moving in long cavalcades through the mud, tramping their weary way towards the gates. All are watched over by the warriors in dark armour, standing sentinel on their heavy barded

destriers.

He is met on the road by knights of the Order, themselves fresh from sallies into the shadows. One takes off his helm, revealing a close-shorn scalp, a noble visage, a battle-toughened skin.

‘Son of the forest!’ the knight hails, saluting him. ‘Another victory?’

He looks up. He is weary beyond imagining, and the words of that last creature, the one that had the form of a man and spoke with the speech of mortals, still echoes in his ears.

‘The day will come,’ he says, shaking the filth from his gauntlet.

The knight dismounts, comes closer. He leans in, like a conspirator. ‘Yes, eventually,’ he says, softly. ‘But while we purge these forests, the other Orders grow more powerful. You know my counsel. Turn aside from the hunt, my liege, just for a season.’

He does not look at the knight. He looks at the people making their way towards the safety of the war-keep. They give no thanks for what is done on their behalf. They were not party to the oaths that bind their protectors, even though their future depends on them.

‘We made a promise, brother,’ he says.

‘You think the others will keep theirs?’

‘What does that matter to me?’

‘Because this world will one day have a single master. It must be you.’

He starts to walk again, his boots sinking up to the spurs in mud. Every movement is ponderous, freighted with ingrained fatigue.

‘Have a care for destiny!’ the knight calls out after him. ‘An oath can be forgotten. Power cannot.’

He keeps walking.

‘Then what do you wish to be known for, my liege?’ the knight asks, a final plea. ‘When the annals are written, what do you wish them to say of you?’

He keeps walking. He never looks back.

‘That I was ever, and only, thus,’ he says, tasting the raw, frigid air of another Caliban dawn. ‘The hunter. The slayer of beasts.’

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An extract from ‘The Emperor’s Architect’ by Guy Haley, taken from *Sons of the Emperor: An Anthology*.

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There were dreams the Emperor had for all of mankind.

They were not the same dreams that his subjects had.

Olivier suffered through his least favourite nightmare. He looked on as iron giants slaughtered crowds of faceless people, whose abstracted forms suggested they were not human. They were angular, with pointed feet and hands, as if they were models folded from sheets of paper. But they were people. Their screams and their blood left no doubt of that.

Olivier was recording the event. How many paper people killed here, how many artfully slaughtered there. He wrote as fast as he could. For some ridiculous reason his pen was an antiquated quill, an actual feather, rather than the autoscribe he used in the course of his work. Paper spilled in an endless spool from his lap. He tried to record all he saw, racing across the paper to capture every nuance of the massacre. He couldn't. It was impossible, but he couldn't stop. There was something menacing behind him. Its disapproval of his work hung over him. Olivier sobbed; his handwriting became an illegible scrawl, he wrote so fast the pen split and his hand ached, but he could not get down what the presence desired. The paper people died in their droves, bludgeoned apart by steel fists. Their blood ran like ink.

The thing came closer. It meant him harm.

'Look at it – isn't it beautiful!'

He couldn't get it all down!

'Olivier, wake up!'

Olivier came awake with a jerk and a gasp. His wife's bland expression greeted him, her mild eyes expressing query.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

Olivier wiped sweat from his face. ‘I’m fine. I’m fine.’

‘Nightmares?’

‘I said I was fine, Marissa,’ he said sharply.

She looked at him strangely. He didn’t think she knew how much he had come to resent her, though he had tried his best to show her. That annoyed him too. Everything about her annoyed him.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘We have arrived.’ She pointed out of the viewport by their seats.

They were man and wife, Marissa and Olivier, bonded under his patronym of LeBon thirty long years ago. Life had been good to them. They were of high social class, better fed and cared for than the common man of the Imperium. Their status was such that even the transit yacht carrying them from voidship to world was luxurious.

Through armourglass dulled by the impacts of interplanetary dust, a planet was visible. Reflected light glowed from myriad lakes and snow caps. There was nothing that could be called an ocean. The almost contiguous landmass that covered the majority of the surface was predominantly green-brown and wrinkled all over with mountain ranges. If a planet were a human face, this one was an old woman. Olivier and Marissa had travelled to dozens of worlds. He had become inoculated against the marvels of planetary approach. Repetition rendered the wondrous banal.

Marissa retained her joy. Her childish wonder irritated her husband. Another thankless task awaited them on the surface, another pointless runaround trying to achieve the impossible, engaging with beings who did not care what they were trying to do. Olivier was sick of it all. But Marissa got more evangelical about their work with every frustrating assignment.

It was a great honour, that’s what the Order of Remembrancers had told Olivier when he and Marissa were given their role. They weren’t married then, and Olivier had believed his masters.

Biographers to the primarchs. There were a select few of their kind given that title. They had accepted proudly. After four decades of chasing demigods who did not want to speak with him, Olivier saw the pride of his younger self as hubris. He had wasted his life.

Marissa never lost her enthusiasm.

‘Olympia!’ she said with breathless awe. ‘Home world of Perturabo, primarch of the Iron Warriors. See Olivier, it is a beautiful world.

Beautiful.’

‘Yes,’ he said without conviction. ‘Beautiful.’

For Marissa, a near holy duty drew closer. For Olivier, a punishment.

She kissed her aquila pendant when she thought he wasn’t looking. The ship began its descent.

‘The Emperor protects,’ she whispered.

Consciousness builds in the developing brain scrap by scrap. Imagine the accretion disk around a star. Through time and gravity’s influence a planet is born. Who could foresee the dust would make a world? The line between dust and planet is ill-defined. At what point does one state become another? When do the cells of a developing foetus change from a collection of individual living things into an aggregate that functions as an organ? At what moment does a new heart take its first beat? When do chemical reactions in a warm pool cease to be driven by external factors, and instead become self-perpetuating? When does chemistry become life? What is the line between each stage; what moment is the boundary to the instant before; what marks the boundary to the instant after? There are self-evident moments where something is one thing or another. But what of the moments between? How can these liminal stages be defined?

Such thoughts as these floated without anchor. One day they would inhabit the exceptional mind of a being who approached the divine. Just then, they were scraps drawn to other scraps, making from themselves something greater, like a world from dust, or a child from cells, or life from elemental broth.

So is consciousness born.

Outside the being’s body was only warm dark, and the mechanical rhythms of an artificial womb. There had been voices, and a presence that touched and moulded, but they were gone.

In the process of transition between two states, can the object changing be said to be either of the discrete objects it will be and has been? How many states exist between? An infinite shading, or infinitesimally small slices of differing existence?

The being felt the slow, greedy tug of a giant object so massive it bent space time around itself.

Gravity, thought the being. Gravity exerts influence. Influence effects

change.

There was a shifting in the being's centre of mass. A shaking and a bouncing around the core of itself. The intrusion of outside stimuli defined for the being the shape of its body, and he knew that he was male. Before, he had not been aware of having a body at all. Now he was: four limbs, a torso, a head. Smooth skin felt vibrations through liquid and the heat it conveyed from beyond.

The being had considered all these things to be a part of himself. The increase of stimuli prompted him to divide himself from other things. Body, liquid, shell. That was his universe. The shell thrummed with stress harmonics. The liquid moved in sluggish tides.

High density alloy, he thought of the shell. He recognised its strength. He felt the same strength in himself.

Acceleration pressed him upwards. Articles that were not part of his body but which interfaced with it tugged at him. He was apart from his casing, but he was integrated with it, he realised.

He also realised, I am falling.

Sound returned as a dull rumble. Then a greater heat. Gravity pulled at him, acceleration pushed. A gaseous medium objected to his passage through it.

Atmosphere, he thought. Planet.

The descent lasted minutes, until terminating violently. The impact of his arrival boomed through his confined world. Light poured in through rents in his casing. The liquid that warmed and protected him rushed out.

Coughing violently, he discovered he had lungs.

In his few minutes of consciousness, the casing had gone from being part of him, to a protective externality, to a trap. Its dying machines wailed out their myriad malfunctions. The being ripped at the slippery tubes penetrating his skin, and fought his way free through the metal.

Cold air chilled him. White light blinded him. His body was as exceptional as his gathering mind, and rapidly adjusted itself to the change in environment.

He looked upon a rugged landscape.

Stone, he thought. Sedimentary formation. Mountain. Tectonic upheaval. Sky. Planetary atmospheric envelope. He knew the names and nature of all things as he experienced them, as if a parent whispered the words in his ear

the moment he set eyes upon them.

He rolled onto his back. Steam rose from his naked body. His casing, his conveyance, his womb, stood upright on the mountainside bleeding oily fluids. The silver skin was blackened, and yet the large numeral ‘IV’ stencilled on the side was still visible.

The being lay on the cold hard stone and stared at the machine.

What am I? thought the being. *Am I this number? Am I… four?*

He was not a number. He was adamant. He had a name. It came to him unbidden.

He clenched fists slick with amniotic gels, and stood on legs never used before.

‘I am Perturabo,’ he announced to the mountains.

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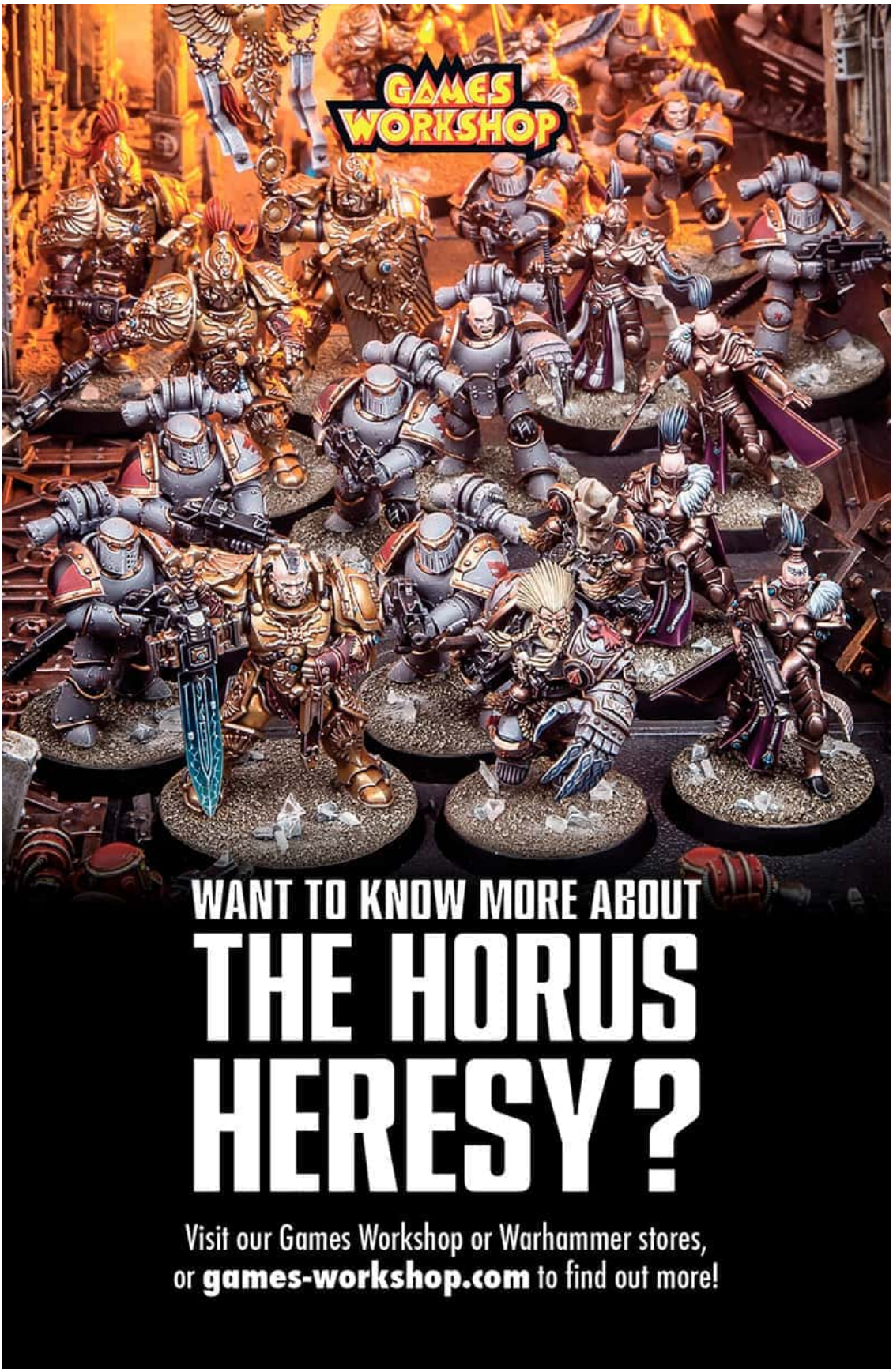
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